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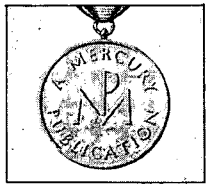

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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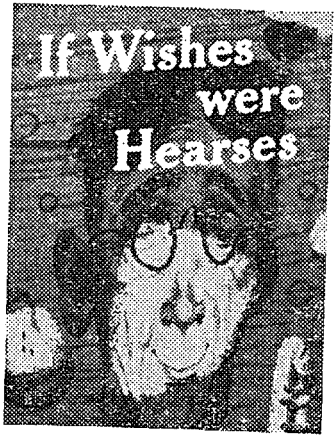

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IT TAKES A THIEF

by ARTHUR MILLER

SOME PEOPLE ARE LAUGHING IN OUR neighborhood these nights, but most of us are just waiting, like the Sheltons. It is simply unbelievable, it came out so right.

Here is this man, Mr. Shelton, a middle-aged man with what they call a nice family and a nice home. Ordinary kind of businessman, tired every night, sits around on Sundays, pinochle and so on. The point is, he's been doing all right the past few years. Automobiles. His used cars were shipped to California, Florida — wherever the war plants were springing up. Did fine. Then the war ended. The new cars started coming through and then the strikes made them scarce. But people wanted them very badly. Very, very badly. He did fine. Very, very fine.

One night not long ago he and his wife decided to take in a night club, and she put on her two diamond rings, the bracelet, and some of her other frozen cash, and they locked up the house — the children are all married and don't live home any more — and they were off for a trip to the city.

Nobody knows what they did in the city, but they stayed out till 3 in the morning. Late enough for Shelton to get a headful. The drive home was slow and careful because the car was one of his brand-new ones and he couldn't see too well in his condition. Nevertheless, when he put the key in the front-door lock he was able to notice that the door swung open at a touch, whereas it usually took some jiggling of the latch. They went in and turned on the living-room lights, and then they saw it.

The drawer of the desk was lying on the floor, and the rug was littered with check stubs and stationery. The Sheltons rushed into the dining room and saw at once that the sterling-silver service was gone from the massive serving table. Shelton clutched at his heart as though he were going to suffocate, and Mrs. Shelton thrust her fingers into her hair and screamed. At this stage, of course, there was only the sensation that an alien presence had passed through their home. Per-

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haps they even imagined that the thief was still there. In wild fright they ran to the stairs and up to their bedroom, and Shelton tripped and fell over a bureau drawer that the thief had left on the threshold. Mrs. Shelton helped him up and made him lie down on the colonial bed and she massaged his heart while they both looked anxiously toward the closet door, which stood open.

When he had caught his breath, he pushed her aside and went into the closet and turned on the light. She crowded in beside him as soon as she saw the terrible expression on his face. The safe. The little steel safe that had always stood in the corner of the closet covered with dress boxes and old clothes, the safe was looking up at them from the corner with its door open. Shelton simply stood there panting. It was Mrs. Shelton who got to her knees and felt inside.

Nothing. Nothing was left. The safe was empty. Mrs. Shelton, on her knees in the closet, screamed again. Perhaps they felt once more the presence, the terrifying presence of the thief, for they rushed one behind the other down the stairs, and Shelton picked up the telephone.

The instrument shook in his hand as he bent over close to the dial and spun it around. Mrs. Shelton moved up and down beside him, clasping and unclasping her hands and weeping. "Oh, my God!"

"Police!" Shelton roared into the telephone as soon as he heard the operator's calm voice. "My house has been robbed. We just got home and —"

His voice caught Mrs. Shelton just as she was about to dig her fingers into her hair again. For an instant she stood perfectly still, then she turned suddenly and swung her arm out and clapped her hand over Shelton's mouth. Infuriated, he attempted to knock her hand away. Then his eyes met hers. They stood that way, looking into each other's eyes; and then Shelton's hand began to shake violently and he dropped the telephone with a loud bang onto the marble tabletop and collapsed into a high-backed, Italian-type chair. Mrs. Shelton replaced the telephone on its cradle as the operator's anxious voice flowed out of it.

They were both too frightened to speak for a few minutes. The same thing was rushing through their heads and there was no need to say what it was. Only a solution was needed, and neither of them could find it. At last Mrs. Shelton said, "You didn't give the operator the name or address. Maybe —"

"We'll see," he said, and went into the living room and stretched out on the couch.

Mrs. Shelton went to the front windows and drew the shades. Then she came back to the couch and proceeded to walk up and down beside it, her breasts rising and falling with the heavy rhythm of her breathing.

Nothing happened for nearly an hour. They even made a pass at undressing, just as though he had not

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shouted frantically into the telephone that his house had been robbed. But they were hardly out of their clothes when the doorbell rang. In dressing gown and slippers Shelton went down the stairs with his wife behind him. In the presence of strangers he always knew how to look calm, so much so that when he opened the door and let the two policemen in, he appeared almost sleepy.

The question of his having hung up without giving his name was cleared away first: He had been too excited to give that detail to the operator. The officers then went about inspecting the premises. That completed, Shelton and his wife sat in the living room with them and gave a detailed description of the seven pieces of jewelry that had been taken from the safe, and the silver service, and the old Persian lamb coat, and the other items, all of which were noted in a black-covered pad that one policeman wrote in. When Shelton had closed the door behind the two officers, he stood thinking for a while, and his wife waited for his word. Finally he said, "We'll report the jewelry to the insurance company tomorrow."

"What about the money?"

"How can I mention the money?"

She knew there was no answer to that one, but it was hard, nevertheless, to give up $91,000 without a complaint.

In bed they lay without moving. Thinking. "What'll we do," she asked, "if they find the crook and he's still got the money?"

A long time later, Shelton said, "They never catch thieves."

Eight days passed, in fact, before Shelton's opinion was proved wrong. The telephone rang at dinnertime. He covered the mouthpiece with his palm and turned to his wife. "They want me to come down and identify the stuff." There was a quavering note in his voice.

"What about the money?" she whispered.

"They didn't mention the money," he said, questioning her with his eyes.

"Maybe tell them you're too sick to go now."

"I'll have to go sometime."

"Try to find out first if they found the money."

"I can't *ask* them, can I?" he said angrily, and turned again to the telephone and said he would be right over.

He drove slowly. The new, purring engine, the $1900 car for which he could easily get 4,000 cash carried him effortlessly toward the police station. He drove slumped in the seat. As though to rehearse, he kept repeating the same sentence in his mind: I am simply a dealer, I am simply a dealer; I keep that much cash on hand to buy cars with. It sounded all right, businesslike. But was it possible they were that dumb? Maybe. They were just plain cops. Plain cops might not realize that 91,000 was too much to have in a safe for that purpose. And still, it was possible they would not stumble on the truth at all, not know that cash in a home safe was prob-

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ably not entered on any ledger or income-tax form. Cops did not know much about big money, he felt. And yet — $91,000. Oh! $91,000! His insides grew cool at the thought of it. Not 20,000, or 40,000, not even 75,000, but $91,000. His retirement, his whole future ease, his very sureness of gait lay entirely in that money. It had become a tingling sensation for him, a smell, a feeling, a taste — $91,000 cash money in his safe at home. He had even stopped bothering to read the papers in the past year. Nothing that happened in the world could touch him while he had $91,000 in his closet.

There were three policemen sitting in the room when he entered. He identified himself, and they asked him to sit down. One of them went out. The remaining two were in shirtsleeves and seemed to be merely waiting around. In a little while a gray-haired man entered, followed by a detective who carried a cheap canvas zipper bag which he set on a desk near the door. The detective introduced himself to Shelton, and asked him to repeat his description of the jewelry. Shelton did so in some detail, answering more specific questions as they occurred to the detective.

The gray-haired man had slumped into a chair. Now he sat staring at the floor. Shelton slowly realized, as he described the jewelry, that this was the thief; for the man seemed resigned, very tired, and completely at home in the situation.

The detective went at last to the desk and opened the zipper bag and laid out the jewelry for Shelton to inspect. Shelton glanced at it and said it was his, picking up a wedding ring which had his name and his wife's engraved on the inside.

"We'll have the coat for you by tomorrow and maybe the silver, too," the detective said, idly arranging the jewelry in a pattern on the desk as he spoke. Shelton felt that the detective was getting at something from the way he played with the jewelry. The detective completed the pattern on the desk and then turned his broad, dark face toward Shelton and said, "Is there anything else you lost?"

Shelton's hand, of its own accord, moved toward his heart as he said, "That's all I can remember."

The detective turned his whole body now and sat easily on the edge of the desk. "You didn't lose any money?"

The gray-haired thief raised his head, a mystified look clouding his face.

"Money?" asked Shelton. And yet he could not help adding, "What money?" Just curiously.

"We found this on him," the detective said, reaching into the bag and taking out five rolled-up wads of money wrapped in red rubber bands. Shelton's heart hurt him when he saw the rubber bands, because they, more than any of the other items, were peculiarly his. They were the rubber bands he always used in his office.

"There's $91,000 here," the detective said.

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The thief was looking up at Shelton from his chair, an expression of wounded bewilderment drawing his brows together. The detective merely sat on the desk, an observer; the moment suddenly belonged only to Shelton and the thief.

Shelton stared at the money without any expression on his face. It was too late to think fast; he had no idea what sort of mind this stolid detective had and he dared not hesitate long enough to sound the man out. A detective, Shelton knew, is higher than a cop; is more like a businessman, knows more. This one looks smart, and yet maybe . . .

Shelton broke into a smile and touched one of the wads of bills that lay on the desk. (Oh, the 91,000; oh, the touch of it!) Sweat was running down his back; his heart pained like a wound. He smiled and stalled for time. "That's a lot of money," he said softly, frantically studying the detective's eyes for a sign.

But the detective was impassive, and said, "Is it yours?"

"Mine?" Shelton said, with a weak laugh. Longingly he looked at the solid wads. "I wish it were, but it isn't. I don't keep 91 thou —"

The thief, a tall man, stood up quickly and pointed to the money. "What the hell is *this?*" he shouted, amazed.

The detective moved toward him, and he sat down again. "It's his. I took it out of the safe with the other stuff."

"Take it easy," the detective said.

"Where did I get it, then?" the thief demanded in a more frightened tone. "What're you trying to do, pin another job on me? I only pulled one, that's all! You asked me and I told you." And, pointing directly up at Shelton's face, he said, "He's pullin' something!"

The detective, as he turned to Shelton, was an agonizingly expressionless man who seemed to have neither pulse nor point of view. He simply stood there, the law with two little black eyes. "You're sure," he said, "that this is not your money?"

"I ought to know," Shelton said, laughing calmly.

The detective seemed to catch the absurdity of it, and very nearly smiled. Then he turned to the thief and, with a nod of his head, motioned him outside. The two policemen walked out behind him.

They were alone. The detective, without a word, returned to the desk and put the jewelry back into the zipper bag. Without turning his head, he said that they would return the stuff to Shelton in the morning. And then he picked up one of the heavy wads, but instead of dropping it into the bag he hefted it thoughtfully in his palm and turned his head to Shelton. "Lot of dough," he said.

"I'll say," Shelton agreed.

The detective continued placing the wads in the bag. Shelton stood a little behind him and to one side, watching as best he could for the slightest change in the man's expression. But there was none; the detective might have been asleep but for

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his open eyes. Shelton wanted to leave — immediately. It was impossible to know what was happening in the detective's head.

And yet Shelton dared not indicate his desperation. He smiled again, and shifted his weight easily to one foot and started to button his coat, and said — as if the question were quite academic — "What do you fellas do with money like that?"

The detective zipped the bag shut. "Money like what?" he asked evenly.

A twinge of pain shot through Shelton's chest at the suspicious reserve in the detective's question. "I mean, money that's not claimed," he amended.

The detective walked past him toward the door. "We wait," he said, and opened the door.

"I mean, supposing it's never claimed?" Shelton asked, following him, still smiling as though with idle curiosity.

"Hot money is never claimed," the detective said. "We'll just wait. Then we'll start looking around."

"I see."

Shelton walked with the detective to the door of the precinct station, and he even talked amiably, and then they said a pleasant good night.

Staring at the pavement rolling under the wheels of his car, he could summon neither feeling nor thought. It was only when he opened the door of his house, the house that had once contained the fortune of his life, that his numbness flowed away, and he felt weak and ill.

"There must be a way to get it back," she began.

"How?"

"You mean to tell me —?"

"I mean to tell you!" he shouted, and got to his feet. "What'll I do, break into the station house?"

"But they've got laws against robbery!"

In reply, Shelton pulled his collar open and climbed the stairs and went to bed.

These days, Shelton rides to business very slowly. The few friends he has on the block have grown accustomed to the gray and haunted stare in his eyes. The children seem to quiet down as he guides his car through their street games.

Sometimes he goes by the police station, and passing it he slows down and peers through the car window at it, but he always continues on.

And when a police car rolls into the block on its ordinary tour, people can be seen stopping to watch until it passes his house. Nobody has said anything, of course, but we are waiting with Shelton for that awful moment when the white coupé pulls up at his door. And it must, of course.

Thirty days, maybe two months from now, it will turn the corner and slow down, and gradually, ominously, come to a stop.

The house is very quiet these nights — almost silent. The shades are drawn, and it is seldom that you see anyone going in or out. The Sheltons are waiting.

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An "unknown" story by Quentin Reynolds, one of the best known and best loved writers of our time . . . Mr. Reynolds — reporter, sports writer in the great tradition, foreign correspondent, editor, roving investigator, lecturer, radio and television commentator, novelist, movie scenarist, and recently a biographer — Quentin Reynolds, man of good will, faces the problems of our confused era and keeps growing; and although the demands on his talent and interests increase, he still manages to find time every once in a while to write in a medium which he deeply respects — the detective story.

BLOOD-BROTHERS

by QUENTIN REYNOLDS

THERE WAS NO USE TRYING TO work. Those church bells kept chiming at minute intervals and, though they weren't loud, they were insistent and their tones crept into the room and hung there, getting between me and any work. It was Friday in Berlin, and why church bells should be ringing on a Friday afternoon I couldn't figure out.

It was a beautiful day, too — Berlin offers a lovely spring in compensation for the many unpleasant features of living in Germany's capital. I had just bought several new records for my phonograph and I thought I'd try them out. I picked one at random — it was the "Liebestod" from *Tristan and Isolde*. I put it on the machine and was about to play it when my servant announced the Baron von Genthner.

"Not interrupting any work, I hope?" he asked me questioningly.

"Not at all. I can't work with those bells making that racket. Come in and have a drink. Have two drinks." I was glad to see the Baron; he was the only German I knew who managed to keep absolutely detached from German political intrigue. He had been a great war hero. When the War ended he had retired from further active participation. Henceforth he would be a spectator. He remained a spectator and not even a very interested spectator. The only thing which really interested him was music — not contemporary music, but the music of the masters. Music, he often said, reached its apotheosis in Wagner. Since then only Brahms had been touched with the divine spark. Since Brahms — nothing.

"Lovely weather for April," von Genthner said. "I was noticing the peonies in the park."

He paused in front of my phono-

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graph and he picked up the record I had been about to play.

"'Liebestod?' Liebestod?' The love death . . ." he whispered, half to himself. "What chance, what mad quirk of fate made you want to play this record today?"

"I don't know. One record is much like another to me, you know. Why should the 'Liebestod' affect you so?"

He didn't answer for a moment. Then he sat down in a heavy armchair. "You know, I would like a drink. Some brandy, perhaps."

"Sure," I laughed. "I'll get a bottle."

I got a bottle and two glasses. I opened the bottle and poured us each a drink. He tossed his down at a gulp without ever murmuring the conventional "Prosit."

"Something's troubling you. Is it those chimes from the church bells?"

Von Genthner looked up. "Twenty years ago today a man asked me to play the 'Liebestod' for him. I didn't play it, but every year on this day the memory of three hours I spent with him comes back. It — it is disturbing."

"What is the silly song all about?" I asked testily. "I know it's from *Tristan and Isolde*, but that's all."

He looked at me pityingly, and sighed. "Whatever do they teach you in your American universities! In the last act of the opera — it was written by Wagner; you've heard of him, I trust?" he asked scathingly.

"Wagner? There was a Honus Wagner who played shortstop for the Pittsburgh team. He had bow-legs and he could hit like hell."

"Tristan is wounded. As he is dying, Isolde comes to him. He dies comforted by her and she sings the 'Liebestod.' The song tells him that their love is so great there is no need to fear death; it is a song that promises life hereafter, not only in words, but in music. It is a song which would comfort a dying man, for it promises that the end has not come; that beyond there is something greater than life which after all is but an incident."

"You're a philosopher, my friend," I said.

"I'm a musician," he said, too forcefully. "Which is a great deal more important. Philosophy and logic are two tricky sisters who can prove anything. Music is the only great truth, the only great honesty, for it is unanswerable. You recall Browning in 'Abt Vogler' when he says:

> '*The rest may reason and welcome,*
> '*Tis we musicians know.*' "

"And you wouldn't play 'Liebestod' twenty years ago for whom, and what about it?"

"Twenty years ago," he mused. "That was right in those first awful two years of the War. . . ."

He paused; then — "You know what day this is, I suppose?"

I was puzzled. "Sure, it's Friday, April 19, isn't it?"

He smiled. "It doesn't matter. Now I'll tell you the story. Every opera must have an overture, my

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friend. Why, Beethoven wrote three for *Fidelio*. Now our overture is over and we are in the midst of the War. We're back in 1915 on the Western Front not far from that city of Armentières — just a couple of miles east of it over toward Ypres. I was a major then, commanding three companies, part of the German Fourth Army. In May of that year we sustained horrible losses.

"The French and English, who were stationed opposite us, were thoroughly spent. We knew that they would have to wait for reinforcements before they could attack. We ourselves were tired, getting our breath after those minor, but horribly wearying engagements. Then there came orders from the General Staff which shook us considerably. Six thousand men in our sector were detailed to duty on the Russian front. They were to be withdrawn immediately, that night in fact, but would be replaced within a week by fresh troops which were finishing their training in the rear. I was frankly nervous. If the French and English knew of this withdrawal they would undoubtedly attack and, undermanned as we would be, there would be nothing we could do about it. But the withdrawal of the troops had been accomplished with the greatest secrecy, and we were fairly confident that there were no leaks.

"Two hours after the last of the 6,000 men had left, the French and English attacked. It was a swift, sudden foray that caught us absolutely off guard. They almost literally destroyed us.

"The Sixth Bavarian and the Fourth Ersatz hurried to our aid, and once they arrived the English retreated. Their work was done. They hadn't attempted any major offensive — it was merely one of those sharp thrusts intended to harry us. Well, they harried us all right and in the process of harrying us they killed 2,500 of our men.

"I was present at the meeting of the General Staff when the attack was discussed. The loss of the men was bad enough, but what really worried us, of course, was the fact that the enemy knew of our plans so quickly. Until then we hadn't known the excellence of their Intelligence Department.

"Oh, we knew there were plenty of spies in our midst. We had caught many of them and our custom was to send them back to the rear lines to a prison camp where regular court-martials were held. But the General Staff decided that sterner measures were needed. The general who presided issued his orders. Henceforth, if a spy was found he should be brought to the nearest officer with the rank of major. The major was to select two captains and hold an immediate court-martial on the spot. If found guilty, the man should be executed within three hours.

" 'It isn't pleasant to have to condemn a man to death,' the general said through tight lips, 'nor is it pleasant to have to direct such an

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execution. But remember — one spy knew that we were withdrawing 6,000 men. This one man knew, communicated his knowledge to the enemy — and 2,500 Germans have paid with their lives.'

"There was a lull for three days after that attack. We sat licking our wounds and they dug in, waiting for the attack they knew we had planned against Ypres. Then came Friday. Two of my captains came to me with a story of a German who had escaped from the English prison camp in back of their lines and had managed to get through to us.

" 'His name is Johann Gluck,' one of them said. 'He was a captain in the Sixth Division who was captured more than a month ago.'

" 'That is one of the divisions that was withdrawn, isn't it?' I asked.

" 'Yes,' the Captain said, 'But this Captain Gluck, nice chap by the way, knows so much about the present English position that we wanted to suggest to you that instead of sending him to rejoin his division you keep him here. After that attack the other night we can use another captain.'

"These two captains of mine were named Hermann Kreutzer and Franz Marschner, fine officers both of them. Strictly officers, typical officers to whom war was that for which they had spent a lifetime of training. I told them to bring in this new find.

"A few moments later they brought Captain Johann Gluck in to me. I had a very fine dug-out, really palatial. It was a single, square, sand-bag-and-stone-enforced room. In addition to my cot and a table I had also managed to snare a portable phonograph. I had sent to the rear for records, and although during heavy bombardment the mortality among the records was high, most of my Wagnerian operas had managed to survive, and some Beethoven. If a man has Wagner and Beethoven he really doesn't need much more.

"Captain Johann Gluck walked into the dug-out. He was slightly built, and he had a scar across his cheek. He had a firm mouth and very blue eyes. Very blond, he was the true Germanic type, except for his size. He had a boyish look about him, and when I looked at him something clutched at my throat. Because as I looked at him, I knew that within three hours he would be dead.

" 'I have heard a great deal about the Major von Genthner,' he said in his soft Bavarian voice. 'It is nice to see you. . . .'

" '. . . again,' I finished for him, trying to fight down something within me which was crying: 'You fool, rush to him, throw your arms around him. That is Eric, Eric Rhodes, your friend. That is the boy you grew up with, the boy you went to Heidelberg with, who attended you in a dozen duels, who argued philosophy and music with you. That is Eric Rhodes, your blood-brother!'

" 'You two have met before?' Kreutzer asked. 'How delightful. That calls for a celebration.'

" 'Yes, at Heidelberg,' I said. 'We

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met at Heidelberg. No, it was before Heidelberg . . . Captain, there's a bottle of brandy under my cot. Open it, will you?'

"Captain Gluck laughed and there was a mocking light in his eyes as he looked at me. 'Fine, we'll have a celebration. We are going to celebrate one of the three most momentous occasions in a man's life.'

" 'Come, now,' Kreutzer laughed. 'The three most important occasions in a man's life are his birth, his marriage, and his death. No one is being born here, certainly no one is going to be married, and, judging by the quiet outside, no one is going to die.'

" 'When one meets a very old friend, that too is a very important occasion — no matter under what circumstances the meeting occurs.' If my face was white, no one, I think, noticed it.

" 'Fill mine to the brim,' Gluck laughed, and the beads of the brandy sparkled on a level with the top of the glass. He lifted it without a drop spilling over and drained it.

" 'A steady hand for a man who has been in a prison camp for a month,' Kreutzer laughed.

" 'Well, friend, the next move is up to you. Why not tell your captains who I am.' Gluck spoke in English and Kreutzer and Marschner looked their surprise. 'The Major and I learned English at Heidelberg together,' Gluck said in German. 'Go on with your drinks. We want to talk over old times. And we want to see if we remember our English. *Nicht wahr*, Major?'

" '*Bestimmt! Bestimmt!* Of course. Let's sit down.' And we sat down, Kreutzer and Marschner soon being absorbed in discussing their own ideas for our anticipated offensive against Ypres. Gluck, or Eric Rhodes, and I sat there and ——"

"Von Genthner," I broke in, just a bit puzzled. "Who was Gluck? Who was Eric Rhodes? They were the same man evidently, but who?"

"Eric Rhodes was an English officer," Von Genthner explained. "To put it more bluntly, he was a spy who had come into our lines confident that his perfect German and the fact that the regiment to which he said he had been attached was too far away for any immediate check-up would allay any suspicion. But Eric Rhodes was more than that.

"Eric," Von Genthner said slowly, "was brought up in Mallsdorf, a small town in Bavaria, where I came from. He came there with his parents, who were English, when he was a child. Eric grew up as any Bavarian child would grow up. He and I played together as youngsters. We went to the same schools. Eric always went back to England once a year for a month or two, and this kept him thoroughly British in mind and in spirit. Outwardly he was as German as I. We dreamed dreams as youngsters do and always in our dreams we shared each other's success. I would be a great musician, he a great writer. Then came Heidelberg. I specialized

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in music, he in philosophy. That," Von Genthner added, wryly, "was the only thing we ever disagreed upon."

"But, Von Genthner," I asked, "you said that you and he were blood-brothers. What did you mean?"

"In America I believe you have college fraternities," he said. "At Heidelberg we have corps which roughly correspond to your fraternities. The corps which Eric and I joined had a very impressive ritual of initiation. We were initiated in pairs and we were made — literally — blood-brothers. The symbolic part of it was that in being made a blood-brother to one corps member you become symbolically a blood-brother to all.

"I'll never forget that ceremony. Eric and I, of course, were paired. Our right wrists were slashed and then my wrist was bound to his. The cuts were placed together and then our wrists were fastened tightly so that actually my blood flowed into his open cut and his blood flowed into mine. The wrists were bound until the blood clotted and then indeed were we brothers. 'Now we are one' — I remember the words of the initiation — 'and if I do injury to you I am injuring myself. If you injure me, you injure yourself.'

"Sounds silly, doesn't it?" Von Genthner laughed. "But it isn't silly to a twenty-year-old boy. Eric and I remained friends until we finished Heidelberg; then he went back to London to live and I wandered here and there, coming home just in time to meet the War. But during those years I had often thought of Eric. He had been the closest friend I had ever had."

"And now you were a German officer. Now you had to court-martial and condemn him to death."

Von Genthner nodded and his face was grave. He went on: "Eric said in English: 'I understand that the General Staff has issued orders that the nearest major conduct a court-martial in the case of a spy's being captured and that, if guilty, the spy be shot within three hours.'

" 'Your intelligence is well informed,' I said a bit stiffly.

" 'Oh, yes,' he said carelessly. 'Well, friend, there's no sense in holding a court-martial. Of course I plead guilty. We wanted to know just when you were going to attack Ypres. Rather thought I'd get away with it, you know. After all, I speak better German than most of your officers.' He laughed. 'Now let's face this silly business, Von Genthner. We have three hours. Then I die. Let's make the best of those three hours. We have lots to make up for — do you know it's eight years since I saw you? And so — another drink. Thank God it's French brandy. I never could stand German brandy, you remember?'

" 'And I always preferred it to French,' I reminded him.

" 'Because it was milder,' he said softly. 'Just as you preferred music to philosophy. Philosophy is strong stuff — it is truth untarnished, truth without any sugar coating of senti-

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mentality. Music? Music is a soporific. That's why they have music at weddings and funerals.'

" 'There is nothing sentimental about music at a funeral, Eric,' I said. 'God knows, death is ugly at best. Handel's "Death March" from *Saul* detracts a bit from the ugliness. It is at least a reminder that though one poor devil has passed on there are yet beautiful things left in the world.'

" 'Is there a life hereafter?' Eric asked. 'I don't know. I hope and rather think so. However, I want more consolation when I go than Chopin's — what is that funeral march of his called? The B-Flat Minor Sonata, isn't it?' He reached for the brandy bottle. This time he didn't fill his glass to the brim, yet a few drops spilled over the side of the glass. 'Rotten taste we're showing, Von Genthner, talking of funerals. But then you and I were never sticklers for good taste, were we? Remember that fat professor who tried to teach us mathematics? —'

"He launched forth into one of our more florid adolescent escapades. For a time the ugly walls of the dug-out faded and the voices of Kreutzer and Marschner died away. Now we were swimming across the rapidly-moving Neckar after an all-night session at the Rote Ochsen or one of the other *bierstubes;* we were tramping stern-faced up the winding hill across the river to the Hirchgasse, tipping our caps reverently as we passed the statue of St. Nepomuk, patron of duelists —

" 'Eric,' I said abruptly — and what made me say it I don't know — 'have you still that scar on your wrist?'

"He pushed back his sleeve. He held it out and there was that thin, jagged, white mark. He turned his wrist over and I noticed his watch. We had twenty minutes left.

" 'That was a long time ago, Eric. We swore to be blood-brothers.'

" 'Well,' Eric laughed, and for the first time I noticed a slightly uneven note in his voice, 'Edmund Burke once said: "War suspends the rule of moral obligation." If we are both fools enough to fight in a war, we must abide by its rules. But let's forget the war — I mean for the next twenty minutes. We can at least kill and be killed like gentlemen. I am always amused,' he sneered, 'when officers talk about fighting and dying like gentlemen. I was almost thrown out of my officers' training camp when I asked in all innocence: "How do you stick a bayonet into a man's stomach in a gentlemanly manner?" '

" 'I am afraid, Eric, I am losing my taste for war a little, too. On paper it is fascinating and glamorous — but actually it's dirty, unpleasant, a horrible thing.'

" 'Poor Von Genthner,' he mocked. 'You talk like a pacifist. I don't mind war so much — I mind the sickening bait which is held by those who send us to war.

" 'You know, Von Genthner,' he went on, seriously, 'I think there may

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be something in pacifism at that. What are you fighting for? Who will gain if Germany wins the war?'

"We were both talking against time and we both knew it. I saw beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead. I was clenching my hands and the nails were drawing blood.

" 'I don't know what posterity will say of this war, Eric,' I said.

" 'Posterity will never say that the *Lusitania* sank a submarine,' he mocked. 'But to get back for a moment. You are not fighting for Germany, my friend, you are fighting for Krupp. The French are fighting for the glory and further dividends of Schneider-Creusot. The Czechoslovakians are fighting for the glory of Skoda. And, of course, the Japs are fighting for Mitsui. This is a war of munition manufacturers.'

" 'For God's sake, Eric, stop this talk,' I cut in — so sharply that Kreutzer and Marschner looked up and exchanged winks. Their major was a little drunk, they thought. 'Stop it, Eric,' I whispered.

"Eric's face was white, but his voice was level. 'You have to do something within ten minutes which is repellent to you. But you have to do it. In all fairness, Von Genthner, I ask you which of us is bearing up the better? What of your Wagner now? What of your Beethoven? What of your other masters? They aren't helping you. Why cannot you believe as — oh, as Buddha believed, for instance? Buddha, dreaming of the blessed peace of Nirvana, rested under the Botree — and he discovered that all living was painful. Death was a beautiful release from pain. So, Von Genthner, I do not fear death. And now, friend, my time is up.'

"He looked at his watch. 'We have talked for three hours. Do you recall what day this is, Von Genthner? It is the same day on which another and greater man spent three hours of agony in a garden called Gethsemane. Von Genthner, will you give the orders? Or shall I? Suppose I do it. Kreutzer! Marschner! '

"He spoke sharply in German now: 'The Major's orders are that you immediately assemble a firing squad of six men. Have them ready in three minutes. The Major has discovered a spy who shall be shot according to the orders of the General Staff.'

"Kreutzer and Marschner looked at me. I was numb. 'They are the Major's orders,' Eric said crisply, and they left the dug-out.

" 'One final drink, Von Genthner.' Eric filled and raised his glass. 'What shall we toast? Life? It's been fun, but it hasn't lasted long enough to warrant the dignity of a toast. Death? We don't know enough about it to waste good brandy on it. Oh, I know, my friend. Do you know those lines of Du Maurier's:

"La Vie est brève:
Un peu d'espoir,
Un peu de rêve,
Et puis — Bonsoir."

"Eric smiled. 'A good epitaph: "Life is brief, a little hope, a little

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dream, and then — good night." '

"I stood up. At least I would try to match his courage. I had to do this thing. 'Goodbye, Eric,' I said, grasping his hand. I don't know if he saw the tears in my eyes.

" 'Goodbye.' He wheeled and turned toward the door. He turned once and glanced back. His eyes fell on my phonograph. Then his eyes wavered. And now he wasn't the mocking-eyed Eric I had always known. Suddenly some inner support which had been holding him up collapsed. He was beaten. Not afraid, God knows. He had no physical fear. But suddenly he realized that his sense of values had toppled like a house of cards. That to which he had always clung had fallen.

" 'Von Genthner,' he asked, and his voice cracked, 'would you play "Liebestod" for me? Play it loudly so that I can shut my eyes and hear it even outside. Play "Liebestod" for me, Von Genthner.'

"I sprang forward, then stopped. 'No, Eric,' I said sharply, 'I won't play "Liebestod" for you.' "

Von Genthner pulled himself out of his chair and walked to the window. Those chimes had stopped and now my room was empty of the sound, but full of something else.

"Twenty years ago today that was," he mused, "at just about this time." He turned from the window.

"Finish it, finish your story, Von Genthner. What happened?"

"Why" — he looked surprised — "I did finish it. He asked me to play 'Liebestod' — the song of death — and I refused, that's all."

"Well, you might have played it for him. After all, you were going to have him killed."

"Killed? Killed?" the Baron said testily. "Do you think I could kill a man who asked me to play the 'Liebestod'? Of course I didn't have him killed. I told Kreutzer and Marschner that our friend had been drinking too much and that his ordering a firing squad had been a joke. I told them to get hold of an English officer's uniform and give it to Captain Gluck. I said that we were sending him over into the British lines to see what he could find out. His English was so good, I said, that it would certainly fool the enemy. He could say that he had just escaped from a German prison camp. My captains thought it a great idea.

" 'You are a very brave man to take such a risk,' Kreutzer said to Eric.

"Eric looked at me and said: 'If you have music in your heart and in your mind and in your soul you do not need to be brave.' "

Von Genthner stood up.

"Is the story finished to your satisfaction now?" he asked. "I think I have omitted nothing. . . . Oh, about those church bells which bothered you. It is the custom in Germany to ring the church bells from 2 o'clock until 4 — one day a year. It is to remind us of the three hours of agony which Our Lord spent in the Garden of Gethsemane."

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UNBREAKABLE ALIBI

by FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

THE TROUBLE WITH HERBERT RICH was that he was too clever. Always he would reject the simple for something more ingenious and complex. When he murdered Jack Fleet it was this trait which cost him his life — this and an admitted bit of bad luck.

Herbert and his young wife Joan lived alone in a hamlet on the slopes of the Sussex Downs. Herbert was a market gardener, but his real interest lay in photography, at which he was supremely good.

He was deeply in love with Joan, but feared for her the dullness of country life. His fear grew when his handsome and well-to-do friend, Fleet, began to show signs of interest in her. Fleet was the owner of a works at Shoreham and had been a brother officer during the war. He and Joan were acting in a charity play, and this gave him opportunities.

As the intimacy grew, Herbert felt more and more that if he did not get rid of Fleet he would lose Joan. Then, his fear clouding his judgment he decided that nothing less than Fleet's death would suffice. The idea revolted him, but for Joan he would do anything.

His ingenious mind soon worked out a plan. It involved two preliminaries. First, at exactly 8:53 on a dull morning, he took a photograph from his drive, showing the side of his house and behind it, the church tower with its clock. Next, Joan must be out of the way while the crime was being committed. He dared not arrange this, so had to await her initiative. As it happened, within a month she was invited to York to a wedding. While she was away, a Mrs. Tolley, who normally came in to clean from 9:00 to 11:00, would return in the evening to cook supper. She could not come in time to make breakfast owing to getting her children out to school, but each night she would leave everything ready for Herbert to heat up in the morning.

When the day came, Herbert ran Joan into Brighton and saw her off. He then lunched at a club of which both he and Fleet were members. As he had every reason to hope, Fleet came in.

"Joan's going north tomorrow for a few days," he told Fleet. "Come and spend the night with us. She'll miss some rehearsals and wants to talk to you about it."

When Fleet turned up that evening, Herbert greeted him with a long face. "Sorry to say Joan has gone," he declared. "There was a phone call this afternoon. The girl whose wedding she was asked to has met with an accident. Joan's catching the night train out to stay with her."

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Fleet obviously accepted the tale, but said that in that case he could not trouble Herbert to put him up and would run back to Brighton.

"Well," Herbert answered, "I admit the house is not the same without Joan. But Mrs. Tolley has prepared supper and she's not too bad a cook. At least, have a bite with me."

It was clear that Fleet would have preferred to leave, but he could not well refuse Herbert's invitation.

"That your new car?" Herbert went on. "They're great buses. And that gives me an excuse," he grinned, "a subject for a photograph. Just move round the corner of the house. If you stand at the car door, I won't keep you more than a sec."

Fleet agreed good-humoredly and the picture was taken. It recorded the time as shown on the clock in the background. Unhappily, it also included an admirable view of the steps to Herbert's back door, but artistry was not Herbert's aim.

Mrs. Tolley had achieved an excellent meal and during it Herbert took the crucial step. Into Fleet's whiskey he slipped two powdered sleeping tablets.

After supper he led the way to the lounge. "Sit down a moment," he invited. "I'd like your advice on a business matter. I'm thinking of giving up the market garden and opening a studio in Brighton. What do you think of the idea?"

By this Herbert achieved two ends: first, Fleet would remain in the lounge till he fell asleep, and second, Mrs. Tolley would afterwards say that when she left the guest was still there.

With Fleet asleep and Mrs. Tolley gone, Herbert had the house to himself. He immediately got busy. Going to his dark room, a shed in the yard, he developed and quickly dried his two negatives. Then very carefully he blacked out a part of each. On that showing the car, the face of the clock became a black spot; on the other, everything but the face of the clock was taken out. Printing from each in turn, he produced a composite view showing Fleet standing by his car at 8:53.

Having removed the vital prints to safety, he deliberately set fire to the dark room, seeing that both telltale negatives were destroyed. He had some buckets of water ready, and before too much damage was done he extingusished the fire.

He now put on rubber gloves, and going to Fleet's car, screwed onto the wheel, handbrake, and gear lever, clamps which he had previously constructed. These would enable him to drive without smudging Fleet's fingerprints. This took some time — adjustments had to be made — and it was getting on to 2:00 A.M. before Herbert was finished.

Then came the part of the affair which he most dreaded. He returned to the lounge and with blows of a sandbag deliberately murdered the sleeping man. Round the body he fixed a chain to provide a weight.

By this time Herbert was trem-

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bling in every limb, but a stiff pull from his flask steadied him. Using all his strength, he carried Fleet to the car, managing with immense difficulty to lift him into the back. Having thrown a rug over the body, he drove off.

Herbert drove as fast as he could with safety, keeping to the more unfrequented roads. His objective was 40 miles away, a bridge over the deep and sluggish Brender River. Before reaching it he switched off his lights, and driving by the faint glow from the stars reached the centre span. Once again putting forth his entire strength, he dragged Fleet's body from the back seat, levered it up on to the parapet, and pushed it over. It fell with a hollow splash. Because of the chain, Herbert was sure it would immediately sink to the bottom and never again be seen.

A deep pull from his flask once more steadied him. He drove on in the dark across the bridge, then with headlights on, set his course for home.

But not quite for home. Some five miles short of it he swung off the road, and following a lane, drove into a disused sandpit. There he hid the car among dense shrubs. Having removed his clamps from the controls, he completed the journey on foot.

All went well till he was within sight of his house. He had approached through a spinney to avoid the road and was about to step out into the garden when he had a fright. The milkman was coming, hurrying with his bottles to the back door. Mrs. Tolley, before leaving at night, put out the empty bottle, taking in the fresh one on her arrival in the morning. Herbert threw himself down behind a shrub. The man glanced in his direction, but Herbert felt satisfied he had not been seen.

When the milk cart had gone he crept into the house. Though dog-tired, he was not yet finished. He went upstairs, got into his bed, and ruffled it up as from a night's sleep. Then he did the same with the spare-room bed. He washed and shaved, using the spare-room basin and towels. Almost fainting from hunger, he next prepared a large breakfast and ate it, using alternately two sets of table utensils.

He felt safe. Fleet naturally had left word at his private hotel that he would be out for the night. Mrs. Tolley had seen him at supper and would swear that he was still in the house when she left. She would also testify that two beds had been slept in and two breakfasts eaten. By the time inquiries were made she would have washed up, so the absence of Fleet's fingerprints on the utensils could not be noticed. The photograph would prove that Fleet had not left before 8:53 that morning, after which Herbert would have an unbreakable alibi. There could be no doubt as to when the photograph was taken, for first, this was the only night Fleet had been at the house, and second, at 8:53 in the evening it was dark. It would indeed be obvious that

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the man had disappeared voluntarily. But even if by some miracle suspicion were aroused, no action could be taken in the absence of the body.

Yes, Herbert felt completely safe.

When Fleet failed to turn up the next day at his office, his manager began making inquiries. Dissatisfied with what he learned, he rang up the police.

Now, the police know a deal more of what goes on around them than is generally supposed, and they had not missed the gossip about Fleet and Joan. It therefore seemed possible that Fleet had gone to Herbert's, and an Inspector called at the house. He thought it interesting that Joan should have been away from home on that particular night; all the same, Herbert's story sounded convincing.

That evening the car was found. To the police the fact that Fleet had withdrawn none of his money ruled out a deliberate disappearance and they assumed foul play. But if it was murder, where was the body?

Then a further discovery strengthened their suspicions. With the idea of checking the new car's performance, Fleet had been noting the gasoline bought, together with the date and mileage. The police found the car had done 74 miles more than could be accounted for by Fleet's notes.

It is doubtful whether even then they would have got to Herbert but for a crowning piece of luck, good or bad according to the point of view. A group of boys, bathing in the Brender River, began diving from the bridge. One of them discovered the body.

When the police established that the distance from Herbert's house to the bridge, and back to the sandpit, measured exactly 74 miles, they began to see daylight. Without much difficulty they imagined what Herbert could have done. Soon they had built up a strong case against him.

But against their theory was the seemingly incontrovertible evidence of the photograph. If Fleet had been at Herbert's house at 8:53 in the morning, as the clock plainly showed, Herbert could not possibly be guilty. Could a man of his skill then have faked the photo? If he had, it could only have been with one aim.

The Inspector again examined the picture and this time smacked his thigh in delight. Then he called once more on Herbert. After chatting over the affair he said, "Mrs. Tolley tells me that after supper on the night of Mr. Fleet's visit she put out the empty milk bottle as usual, and after 9 next morning took in the full one. Would you agree with that?"

Herbert could not deny what was obviously true.

"Then," went on the Inspector, "at 8:53 in the morning *there should be a milk bottle on your back-door step*. Where is it, Mr. Rich, in this photograph?"

Herbert felt his heart turn to water as he gazed at the empty back-door step.

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You will be happy to learn — as we are delighted to announce — that EQMM has purchased one of the most famous magazines in the history of the detective story — Black Mask. From now on Black Mask will be part of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine — and we have plans, big plans!

You will recall that Black Mask reached its heyday, as "a unique magazine and a new influence in American literature," under the gifted editorship of the late "Cap" Joseph T. Shaw. It was he who brought to full blossom a new type of detective story — a type that differed radically from the classic pattern established by Poe and fostered by Gaboriau and Doyle. This new type of mystery fiction stressed action and fast tempo — "told with a new kind of compulsion and authenticity" — and it soon became known as "the hardboiled school." Some of its most noted practitioners, under "Cap" Shaw's guidance, were Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Erle Stanley Gardner, Carroll John Daly, George Harmon Coxe, Frederick Nebel, Raoul Whitfield, Thomas Walsh, and Lester Dent.

No one can deny that the action type of detective story proved to be the most stimulating force since the creation of Sherlock Holmes, and that it had a vital and significant influence on the entire mystery field. Today the force may be somewhat dissipated — many critics believe that the hardboiled school is definitely on the wane. If that is true, it is our plan to "bring it back alive." By incorporating Black Mask into EQMM, we can now give you, from time to time, a sort of tough 'tec supplement. In this periodic department you will find reprints of some of the excellent hardboiled yarns of the past — in this issue, for example, we offer you two typical Black Mask thrillers, one by Black Mask's most famous alumnus,

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Dashiell Hammett, and the other by one of Black Mask's more recent stars, Cornell Woolrich. Also, you will find occasional brand-new stories in the hard-action field — we hope to encourage present-day authors to write originals especially tailored for our new Black Mask section. (Writers: Consider this your engraved invitation to send in your finest stories of the past — for reprint — and your latest work in the Black Mask tradition — for publication in our new department.)

So, under the combined trademarks of EQMM and Black Mask, we shall continue our policy of maximum variety — but only the best of each type . . . *the best tales of pure detection, the best human interest and suspense stories, the best psychological studies and realistic case histories — and now the best specimens of that purely American type of detective story which, to quote from Raymond Chandler, have their bases in fact, "take murder out of the Venetian vase and drop it into the alley," are not afraid of the seamy side of things, deal with violence and melodrama and brutality and gangsters and rackets — and feature that untarnished and honorable common man, the detective-hero of the rough-tough, guts-gore-and-gals, blood-bludgeon-and-bust school . . .*

THE GATEWOOD CAPER

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

HARVEY GATEWOOD HAD ISSUED orders that I was to be admitted as soon as I arrived, so it took me only a little less than fifteen minutes to thread my way past the doorkeepers, office boys, and secretaries who filled up most of the space between the Gatewood Lumber Corporation's front door and the president's private office. His office was large, all mahogany and bronze and green plush, with a mahogany desk as big as a bed in the center of the floor.

Gatewood, leaning across the desk, began to bark at me as soon as the obsequious clerk who had bowed me in bowed himself out.

"My daughter was kidnaped last night! I want the — that did it if it takes every cent I got!"

"Tell me about it," I suggested.

But he wanted results, it seemed, and not questions, and so I wasted nearly an hour getting information that he could have given me in fifteen minutes.

He was a big bruiser of a man, something over 200 pounds of hard

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red flesh, and a czar from the top of his bullet head to the toes of his shoes that would have been at least number twelves if they hadn't been made to measure.

He had made his several millions by sandbagging everybody that stood in his way, and the rage he was burning up with now didn't make him any easier to deal with.

His wicked jaw was sticking out like a knob of granite and his eyes were filmed with blood — he was in a lovely frame of mind. For a while it looked as if the Continental Detective Agency was going to lose a client, because I'd made up my mind that he was going to tell me all I wanted to know, or I'd chuck the job.

But finally I got the story out of him.

His daughter Audrey had left their house on Clay Street at about 7 o'clock the preceding evening, telling her maid that she was going for a walk. She had not returned that night — though Gatewood had not known that until after he had read the letter that came this morning.

The letter had been from someone who said that she had been kidnaped. It demanded $50,000 for her release, and instructed Gatewood to get the money ready in hundred dollar bills — so that there would be no delay when he was told the manner in which the money was to be paid over to his daughter's captors. As proof that the demand was not a hoax, a lock of the girl's hair, a ring she always wore, and a brief note from her, asking her father to comply with the demands, had been enclosed.

Gatewood had received the letter at his office and had telephoned to his house immediately. He had been told that the girl's bed had not been slept in the previous night and that none of the servants had seen her since she started out for her walk. He had then notified the police, turning the letter over to them; and a few minutes later he had decided to employ private detectives also.

"Now," he burst out, after I had wormed these things out of him, and he had told me that he knew nothing of his daughter's associates or habits, "go ahead and do something! I'm not paying you to sit around and talk about it!"

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Me? I'm going to put those — behind bars if it takes every cent I've got in the world!"

"Sure! But first you get that 50,000 ready, so you can give it to them when they ask for it."

He clicked his jaw shut and thrust his face into mine.

"I've never been clubbed into doing anything in my life! And I'm too old to start now!" he said. "I'm going to call these people's bluff!"

"That's going to make it lovely for your daughter. But, aside from what it'll do to her, it's the wrong play. Fifty thousand isn't a whole lot to you, and paying it over will give us two chances that we haven't got now. One when the payment is made — a

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chance either to nab whoever comes for it or get a line on them. And the other when your daughter is returned. No matter how careful they are, it's a cinch she'll be able to tell us something that will help us grab them."

He shook his head angrily, and I was tired of arguing with him. So I left, hoping he'd see the wisdom of the course I had advised before too late.

At the Gatewood residence I found butlers, second men, chauffeurs, cooks, maids, upstairs girls, downstairs girls, and a raft of miscellaneous flunkies — he had enough servants to run a hotel.

What they told me amounted to this: The girl had not received a phone call, note by messenger, or telegram — the time-honored devices for luring a victim out to a murder or abduction — before she left the house. She had told her maid that she would be back within an hour or two; but the maid had not been alarmed when her mistress failed to return all that night.

Audrey was the only child, and since her mother's death she had come and gone to suit herself. She and her father didn't hit it off very well together — their natures were too much alike, I gathered — and he never knew where she was. There was nothing unusual about her remaining away all night. She seldom bothered to leave word when she was going to stay overnight with friends.

She was nineteen years old, but looked several years older; about five feet five inches tall, and slender. She had blue eyes, brown hair — very thick and long — was pale and very nervous. Her photographs, of which I took a handful, showed that her eyes were large, her nose small and regular, and her chin pointed.

She was not beautiful, but in the one photograph where a smile had wiped off the sullenness of her mouth, she was at least pretty.

When she left the house she was wearing a light tweed skirt and jacket with a London tailor's labels in them, a buff silk shirtwaist with stripes a shade darker, brown wool stockings, low-heeled brown oxfords, and an untrimmed gray felt hat.

I went up to her rooms — she had three on the third floor — and looked through all her stuff. I found nearly a bushel of photographs of men, boys, and girls; and a great stack of letters of varying degrees of intimacy, signed with a wide assortment of names and nicknames. I made notes of all the addresses I found.

Nothing in her rooms seemed to have any bearing on her abduction, but there was a chance that one of the names and addresses might be of someone who had served as a decoy. Also, some of her friends might be able to tell us something of value.

I dropped in at the Agency and distributed the names and addresses among the three operatives who were idle, sending them out to see what they could dig up.

Then I reached the police detec-

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tives who were working on the case — O'Gar and Thode — by telephone, and went down to the Hall of Justice to meet them. Lusk, a post-office inspector, was also there. We turned the job around and around, looking at it from every angle, but not getting very far. We were all agreed, however, that we couldn't take a chance on any publicity, or work in the open, until the girl was safe.

They had had a worse time with Gatewood than I — he had wanted to put the whole thing in the newspapers, with the offer of a reward, photographs, and all. Of course, Gatewood was right in claiming that this was the most effective way of catching the kidnapers — but it would have been tough on his daughter if her captors happened to be persons of sufficiently hardened character. And kidnapers as a rule aren't lambs.

I looked at the letter they had sent. It was printed with pencil on ruled paper of the kind that is sold in pads by every stationery dealer in the world. The envelope was just as common, also addressed in pencil, and postmarked *San Francisco, September 20, 9 P.M.* That was the night she had been seized.

The letter read:

Sir:

We have your charming daughter and place a value of $50,000 upon her. You will get the money ready in $100 bills at once so there will be no delay when we tell you how it is to be paid over to us.

We beg to assure you that things will go badly with your daughter should you not do as you are told, or should you bring the police into this matter, or should you do anything foolish.

$50,000 is only a small fraction of what you stole while we were living in mud and blood in France for you, and we mean to get that much or else!

Three.

A peculiar note in several ways. They are usually written with a great pretense of partial illiterateness. Almost always there's an attempt to lead suspicion astray. Perhaps the ex-service stuff was there for that purpose . . . or perhaps not.

Then there was a postscript:

We know someone who will buy her even after we are through with her — in case you won't listen to reason.

The letter from the girl was written jerkily on the same kind of paper, apparently with the same pencil.

Daddy —

Please do as they ask! I am so afraid —

Audrey

A door at the other end of the room opened, and a head came through.

"O'Gar! Thode! Gatewood just called up. Get up to his office right away!"

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The four of us tumbled out of the Hall of Justice and into a police car.

Gatewood was pacing his office like a maniac when we pushed aside enough hirelings to get to him. His face was hot with blood and his eyes had an insane glare in them.

"She just phoned me!" he cried thickly, when he saw us.

It took a minute or two to get him calm enough to tell us about it.

"She called me on the phone. Said, 'Oh, Daddy! Do something! I can't stand this — they're killing me!' I asked her if she knew where she was, and she said, 'No, but I can see Twin Peaks from here. There's three men and a woman, and —' And then I heard a man curse, and a sound as if he had struck her, and the phone went dead. I tried to get central to give me the number, but she couldn't! It's a damned outrage the way the telephone system is run. We pay enough for service, God knows, and we . . ."

O'Gar scratched his head and turned away from Gatewood.

"In sight of Twin Peaks! There are hundreds of houses that are!"

Gatewood meanwhile had finished denouncing the telephone company and was pounding on his desk with a paperweight to attract our attention.

"Have you people done anything at all?" he demanded.

I answered him with another question: "Have you got the money ready?"

"No," he said, "I won't be held up by anybody!"

But he said it mechanically, without his usual conviction — the talk with his daughter had shaken him out of some of his stubbornness. He was thinking of her safety a little now instead of only his own fighting spirit.

We went at him hammer and tongs for a few minutes, and after a while he sent a clerk out for the money.

We split up the field then. Thode was to take some men from headquarters and see what he could find in the Twin Peaks end of town; but we weren't very optimistic over the prospects there — the territory was too large.

Lusk and O'Gar were to carefully mark the bills that the clerk brought from the bank, and then stick as close to Gatewood as they could without attracting attention. I was to go out to Gatewood's house and stay there.

The abductors had plainly instructed Gatewood to get the money ready immediately so that they could arrange to get it on short notice — not giving him time to communicate with anyone or make any plans.

Gatewood was to get hold of the newspapers, give them the whole story, with the $10,000 reward he was offering for the abductors' capture, to be published as soon as the girl was safe — so we would get the help of publicity at the earliest possible moment without jeopardizing the girl.

The police in all the neighboring towns had already been notified — that had been done before the girl's

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phone message had assured us that she was held in San Francisco.

Nothing happened at the Gatewood residence all that evening. Harvey Gatewood came home early; and after dinner he paced his library floor and drank whiskey until bedtime, demanding every few minutes that we, the detectives in the case, do something besides sit around like a lot of damned mummies. O'Gar, Lusk, and Thode were out in the street, keeping an eye on the house and neighborhood.

At midnight Harvey Gatewood went to bed. I declined a bed in favor of the library couch, which I dragged over beside the telephone, an extension of which was in Gatewood's bedroom.

At 2:30 the bell rang. I listened in while Gatewood talked from his bed.

A man's voice, crisp and curt: "Gatewood?"

"Yes."

"Got the dough?"

"Yes."

Gatewood's voice was thick and blurred — I could imagine the boiling that was going on inside him.

"Good!" came the brisk voice. "Put a piece of paper around it and leave the house with it, right away! Walk down Clay Street, keeping on the same side as your house. Don't walk too fast and keep walking. If everything's all right, and there's no elbows tagging along, somebody'll come up to you between your house and the waterfront. They'll have a handkerchief up to their face for a second, and then they'll let it fall to the ground.

"When you see that, you'll lay the money on the pavement, turn around, and walk back to your house. If the money isn't marked, and you don't try any fancy tricks, you'll get your daughter back in an hour or two. If you try to pull anything — remember what we wrote you! Got it straight?"

Gatewood sputtered something that was meant for an affirmative, and the telephone clicked silent.

I didn't waste any of my precious time tracing the call — it would be from a public telephone, I knew — but yelled up the stairs to Gatewood:

"You do as you were told, and don't try any foolishness!"

Then I ran out into the early morning air to find the police detectives and the post-office inspector.

They had been joined by two plainclothesmen, and had two automobiles waiting. I told them what the situation was, and we laid hurried plans.

O'Gar was to drive in one of the cars down Sacramento Street, and Thode, in the other, down Washington Street. These streets parallel Clay, one on each side. They were to drive slowly, keeping pace with Gatewood, and stopping at each cross street to see that he passed.

When he failed to cross within a reasonable time they were to turn up to Clay Street — and their actions from then on would have to be guided by chance and their own wits.

Lusk was to wander along a block

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or two ahead of Gatewood, on the opposite side of the street, pretending to be mildly intoxicated.

I was to shadow Gatewood down the street, with one of the plainclothesmen behind me. The other plainclothesman was to turn in a call at headquarters for every available man to be sent to City Street. They would arrive too late, of course, and as likely as not it would take them some time to find us; but we had no way of knowing what was going to turn up before the night was over.

Our plan was sketchy enough, but it was the best we could do — we were afraid to grab whoever got the money from Gatewood. The girl's talk with her father that afternoon had sounded too much as if her captors were desperate for us to take any chances on going after them roughshod until she was out of their hands.

We had hardly finished our plans when Gatewood, wearing a heavy overcoat, left his house and turned down the street.

Farther down, Lusk, weaving along, talking to himself, was almost invisible in the shadows. There was no one else in sight. That meant that I had to give Gatewood at least two blocks' lead, so that the man who came for the money wouldn't tumble to me. One of the plainclothesmen was half a block behind me, on the other side of the street.

We walked two blocks down, and then a little chunky man in a derby hat came into sight. He passed Gatewood, passed me, went on.

Three blocks more.

A touring-car, large, black, powerfully engined, and with lowered curtains, came from the rear, passed us, went on. Possibly a scout. I scrawled its license number down on my pad without taking my hand out of my overcoat pocket.

Another three blocks.

A policeman passed, strolling along in ignorance of the game being played under his nose; and then a taxicab with a single male passenger. I wrote down its license number.

Four blocks with no one in sight ahead of me but Gatewood — I couldn't see Lusk any more.

Just ahead of Gatewood a man stepped out of a black doorway, turned around, called up to a window for someone to come down and open the door for him.

We went on.

Coming from nowhere, a woman stood on the sidewalk 50 feet ahead of Gatewood, a handkerchief to her face. It fluttered to the pavement.

Gatewood stopped, standing stiff-legged. I could see his right hand come up, lifting the side of the overcoat in which it was pocketed — and I knew his hand was gripped around a pistol.

For perhaps half a minute he stood like a statue. Then his left hand came out of his pocket, and the bundle of money fell to the sidewalk in front of him, where it made a bright blur in the darkness. Gatewood turned abruptly, and began to retrace his steps homeward.

The woman had recovered her

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handkerchief. Now she ran to the bundle, picked it up, and scuttled to the black mouth of an alley a few feet distant — a rather tall woman, bent, and in dark clothes from head to feet.

In the black mouth of the alley she vanished.

I had been compelled to slow up while Gatewood and the woman stood facing each other, and I was more than a block away now. As soon as the woman disappeared, I took a chance and started pounding my rubber soles against the pavement.

The alley was empty when I reached it.

It ran all the way through to the next street, but I knew that the woman couldn't have reached the other end before I got to this one. I carry a lot of weight these days, but I can still step a block or two in good time. Along both sides of the alley were the rears of apartment buildings, each with its back door looking blankly, secretively, at me.

The plainclothesman who had been trailing behind me came up, then O'Gar and Thode in their cars, and soon, Lusk. O'Gar and Thode rode off immediately to wind through the neighboring streets, hunting for the woman. Lusk and the plainclothesman each planted himself on a corner from which two of the streets enclosing the block could be watched.

I went through the alley, hunting vainly for an unlocked door, an open window, a fire-escape that would show recent use — any of the signs that a hurried departure from the alley might leave.

Nothing!

O'Gar came back shortly with some reinforcements from headquarters that he had picked up, and Gatewood.

Gatewood was burning.

"Bungled the damn thing again! I won't pay your agency a nickel, and I'll see that some of these so-called detectives get put back in a uniform and set to walking beats!"

"What'd the woman look like?" I asked him.

"I don't know! I thought you were hanging around to take care of her! She was old and bent, kind of, I guess, but I couldn't see her face for her veil. I don't know! What the hell were you men doing? It's a damned outrage the way . . ."

I finally got him quieted down and took him home, leaving the city men to keep the neighborhood under surveillance. There were fourteen or fifteen of them on the job now, and every shadow held at least one.

The girl would head for home as soon as she was released and I wanted to be there to pump her. There was an excellent chance of catching her abductors before they got very far, if she could tell us anything at all about them.

Home, Gatewood went up against the whiskey bottle again, while I kept one ear cocked at the telephone and the other at the front door. O'Gar or Thode phoned every half hour or so to ask if we'd heard from the girl.

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They had still found nothing.

At 9 o'clock they, with Lusk, arrived at the house. The woman in black had turned out to be a man, and had got away.

In the rear of one of the apartment buildings that touched the alley — just a foot or so within the back-door — they found a woman's skirt, long coat, hat and veil — all black. Investigating the occupants of the house, they had learned that an apartment had been rented to a young man named Leighton three days before.

Leighton was not at home when they went up to his apartment. His rooms held a lot of cold cigarette butts, an empty bottle, and nothing else that had not been there when he rented it.

The inference was clear: he had rented the apartment so that he might have access to the building. Wearing women's clothes over his own, he had gone out of the back door — leaving it unlatched behind him — to meet Gatewood. Then he had run back into the building, discarded his disguise, and hurried through the building, out the front door, and away before we had our feeble net around the block — perhaps dodging into dark doorways here and there to avoid O'Gar and Thode in their cars.

Leighton, it seemed, was a man of about 30, slender, about five feet eight or nine inches tall, with dark hair and eyes; rather good-looking, and well-dressed on the two occasions when people living in the building had seen him, in a brown suit and a light brown felt hat.

There was no possibility, according to both of the detectives and the post-office inspector, that the girl might have been held, even temporarily, in Leighton's apartment.

Ten o'clock came, and no word from the girl.

Gatewood had lost his domineering bullheadedness by now and was breaking up. The suspense was getting him, and the liquor he had put away wasn't helping him. I didn't like him either personally or by reputation, but this morning I felt sorry for him.

I talked to the Agency over the phone and got the reports of the operatives who had been looking up Audrey's friends. The last person to see her had been an Agnes Dangerfield, who had seen her walking down Market Street near Sixth, alone, on the night of her abduction — some time between 8:15 and 8:45. Audrey had been too far away for the Dangerfield girl to speak to her.

For the rest, the boys had learned nothing except that Audrey was a wild, spoiled youngster who hadn't shown any great care in selecting her friends — just the sort of girl who could easily fall into the hands of a mob of highbinders.

Noon struck. No sign of the girl. We told the newspapers to turn loose the story, with the added developments of the past few hours.

Gatewood was broken; he sat with his head in his hands, looking at nothing. Just before I left to follow a

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hunch I had, he looked up at me, and I'd never have recognized him if I hadn't seen the change take place.

"What do you think is keeping her away?" he asked.

I didn't have the heart to tell him what I had every reason to suspect, now that the money had been paid and she had failed to show up. So I stalled with some vague assurances, and left.

I caught a cab and dropped off in the shopping district. I visited the five largest department stores, going to all the women's wear departments from shoes to hats, and trying to learn if a man — perhaps one answering Leighton's description — had been buying clothes in the past couple days that would fit Audrey Gatewood.

Failing to get any results, I turned the rest of the local stores over to one of the boys from the Agency, and went across the bay to canvass the Oakland stores.

At the first one I got action. A man who might easily have been Leighton had been in the day before, buying clothes of Audrey's size. He had bought lots of them, everything from lingerie to a coat, and — my luck was hitting on all cylinders — had had his purchases delivered to T. Offord, at an address on Fourteenth Street.

At the Fourteenth Street address, an apartment house, I found Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Offord's names in the vestibule for Apartment 202.

I had just found the apartment number when the front door opened and a stout, middle-aged woman in a gingham house-dress came out. She looked at me a bit curiously, so I asked:

"Do you know where I can find the superintendent?"

"I'm the superintendent," she said.

I handed her a card and stepped indoors with her.

"I'm from the bonding department of the North American Casualty Company" — a repetition of the lie that was printed on the card I had given her — "and a bond for Mr. Offord has been applied for. Is he all right so far as you know?" With the slightly apologetic air of one going through with a necessary but not too important formality.

"A bond? That's funny! He is going away tomorrow."

"Well, I can't say what the bond is for," I said lightly. "We investigators just get the names and addresses. It may be for his present employer, or perhaps the man he is going to work for has applied for it. Or some firms have us look up prospective employees before they hire them, just to be safe."

"Mr. Offord, so far as I know, is a very nice young man," she said, "but he has been here only a week."

"Not staying long, then?"

"No. They came here from Denver, intending to stay, but the low altitude doesn't agree with Mrs. Offord, so they are going back."

"Are you sure they came from Denver?"

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"Well," she said, "they told me they did."

"How many of them are there?"

"Only the two of them; they're young people."

"Well, how do they impress you?" I asked, trying to get over the impression that I thought her a woman of shrewd judgment.

"They seem to be a very nice young couple. You'd hardly know they were in their apartment most of the time, they're so quiet. I'm sorry they can't stay."

"Do they go out much?"

"I really don't know. They have their keys, and unless I should happen to pass them going in or out I'd never see them."

"Then, as a matter of fact, you couldn't say whether they stayed away all night some nights or not. Could you?"

She eyed me doubtfully — I was stepping way over my pretext now, but I didn't think it mattered — and shook her head.

"No, I couldn't say."

"They have many visitors?"

"I don't know. Mr. Offord is not —"

She broke off as a man came in quietly from the street, brushed past me, and started to mount the steps to the second floor.

"Oh, dear!" she whispered. "I hope he didn't hear me talking about him. That's Mr. Offord."

A slender man in brown, with a light brown hat — Leighton perhaps.

I hadn't seen anything of him except his back, nor he anything except mine. I watched him as he climbed the stairs. If he had heard the woman mention his name he would use the turn at the head of the stairs to sneak a look at me.

He did.

I kept my face stolid, but I knew him.

He was "Penny" Quayle, a con man who had been active in the East four or five years before.

His face was as expressionless as mine. But he knew me.

A door on the second floor shut. I left the woman and started for the stairs.

"I think I'll go up and talk to him," I told her.

Coming silently to the door of Apartment 202, I listened. Not a sound. This was no time for hesitation. I pressed the bell-button.

As close together as the tapping of three keys under the fingers of an expert typist, but a thousand times more vicious, came three pistol shots. And waist-high in the door of Apartment 202 were three bullet holes.

The three bullets would have been in my fat carcass if I hadn't learned years ago to stand to one side of strange doors when making uninvited calls.

Inside the apartment sounded a man's voice, sharp, commanding.

"Cut it, kid! For God's sake, not that!"

A woman's voice, shrill, bitter, spiteful, screaming blasphemies.

Two more bullets came through the door.

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"Stop! No! No!" The man's voice had a note of fear in it now.

The woman's voice, cursing hotly. A scuffle. A shot that didn't hit the door.

I hurled my foot against the door, near the knob, and the lock broke away.

On the floor of the room, a man — Quayle — and a woman were tussling. He was bending over her, holding her wrists, trying to keep her down. A smoking pistol was in one of her hands. I got to it in a jump and tore it loose.

"That's enough!" I called to them when I was planted. "Get up and receive company."

Quayle released his antagonist's wrists, whereupon she struck at his eyes with curved, sharp-nailed fingers, tearing his cheek open. He scrambled away from her on hands and knees, and both of them got to their feet.

He sat down on a chair immediately, panting and wiping his bleeding cheek with a handkerchief.

She stood, hands on hips, in the center of the room, glaring at me.

"I suppose," she spat, "you think you've raised hell!"

I laughed — I could afford to.

"If your father is in his right mind," I told her, "he'll do it with a razor strop when he gets you home again. A fine joke you picked out to play on him!"

"If *you'd* been tied to him as long as I have, and had been bullied and held down as much, I guess *you'd* do most anything to get enough money so that you could go away and live your own life."

I didn't say anything to that. Remembering some of the business methods Harvey Gatewood had used — particularly some of his war contracts that the Department of Justice was still investigating — I suppose the worst that could be said about Audrey was that she was her father's own daughter.

"How'd you rap to it?" Quayle asked me, politely.

"Several ways," I said. "First, one of Audrey's friends saw her on Market Street between 8:15 and 8:45 the night she disappeared; and your letter to Gatewood was postmarked 9 P.M. Pretty fast work. You should have waited a while before mailing it. I suppose she dropped it in the post office on her way over here?"

Quayle nodded.

"Then second," I went on, "there was that phone call of hers. She knew it took anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes to get her father on the wire at the office. If she had gotten to a phone while imprisoned, time would have been so valuable that she'd have told her story to the first person she got hold of — the switchboard operator, most likely. So that made it look as if, besides wanting to throw out that Twin Peaks line, she wanted to stir the old man out of his bullheadedness.

"When she failed to show up after the money was paid, I figured it was a sure bet that she had kidnaped herself. I knew that if she came back

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home after faking this thing, we'd find it out before we'd talked to her very long — and I figured she knew that too, and would stay away.

"The rest was easy — I got some good breaks. We knew a man was working with her after we found the woman's clothes you left behind, and I took a chance on there being no one else in it. Then I figured she'd need clothes — she couldn't have taken any from home without tipping her mitt — and there was an even chance that she hadn't laid in a stock beforehand. She's got too many girl friends of the sort that do a lot of shopping to make it safe for her to have risked showing herself in stores. Maybe, then, the man would buy what she needed. And it turned out that he did, and that he was too lazy to carry away his purchases, or perhaps there was too many of them, and so he had them sent out. That's the story."

Quayle nodded again.

"I was damned careless," he said, and then, jerking a contemptuous thumb toward the girl. "But what can you expect? She's had a skinful of hop ever since we started. Took all my time and attention keeping her from running wild and gumming the works. Just now was a sample — I told her you were coming up and she goes crazy and tries to add your corpse to the wreckage!"

The Gatewood reunion took place in the office of the captain of inspectors, on the second floor of the Oakland City Hall, and it was a merry little party.

For over an hour it was a toss-up whether Harvey Gatewood would die of apoplexy, strangle his daughter, or send her off to the state reformatory until she was of age. But Audrey licked him. Besides being a chip off the old block, she was young enough to be careless of consequences, while her father, for all his bullheadedness, had had some caution hammered into him.

The card she beat him with was a threat of spilling everything she knew about him to the newspapers, and at least one of the San Francisco papers had been trying to get his scalp for years.

I don't know what she had on him, and I don't think he was any too sure himself; but, with his war contracts still being investigated by the Department of Justice, he couldn't afford to take a chance. There was no doubt at all that she would have done as she threatened.

And so, together, they left for home, sweating hate for each other from every pore.

We took Quayle upstairs and put him in a cell, but he was too experienced to let that worry him. He knew that if the girl was to be spared, he himself couldn't very easily be convicted of anything.

I was glad it was over. It had been a tough caper.

Black Mask *section continued on next page*

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DORMANT ACCOUNT

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

I OFTEN THINK, WHAT A STRANGE thing Chance is. I often wonder what would have happened if I had picked the name above it, the name below it. Or any of the others. Nothing, probably. But out of all of them, I singled out that one. How? Why? Chance.

It was in an ad in the paper. The paper was in a waste-bin in the park. And I was in the park on the bum. To make it worse, I was young enough yet to refuse to take it lying down. The old are resigned. I wasn't. I was sore with a burning sense of injustice, bitter about it, and ripe for Chance. And Chance got its devious work in.

I came along a certain pathway in the park. It could have been any other, I had nowhere to go and all of them were alike to me; but it wasn't, it was that particular one. I came to a bench and I sat down; it could have been any other, but it was that one. Nearby there was a paper-bin. I'd already passed half a dozen others without looking into them, but now I got up, went over to this one, and looked into it to see if I could find a discarded newspaper to read while I was sitting there. Most of them were messed up. There was one in it standing on end, fresh as though it had been thrown away by someone after just one reading. I took that one out, went back to the bench with it, slowly started meandering through it.

I came to the ad. It would have been impossible to miss, it took up half the page. It must have cost a good deal to insert, but the state banking law (I found out later) required it. It said:

STANDARD SAVINGS BANK

List of Dormant Accounts, Unclaimed for Fifteen Years or More

And then the five columns of names, each with the last known address given next to it.

I let my eye stray over them desultorily. Money waiting for each one. And most of them didn't know about it. Had forgotten, or were dead, or had vanished forever into the maw of the past. Money waiting, money saying, "Here I am, come and get me." I started to turn the page, to go on with my idle browsing. My last thought, before the list passed from sight, was a rueful, "Gee, I wish I was one of them."

And then suddenly, so unexpectedly it almost seemed to come from somewhere outside of me, "Well, why don't you be?"

My hand turned the page back again.

I was asking myself two things. One: Is it worth trying, would there be enough in it to repay the risk? I did a little figuring. The minimum they

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were required to advertise for by law was $10 or over, after fifteen years. But even on $10, 2 per cent for fifteen years brought it up to thirteen. And until just recently they'd given as high as 4 per cent, some of these banks. So the very least I could expect was $15 or better. Not very much, maybe? Well, what did I have now? A bench in the park and a second-hand newspaper out of a waste-bin. And what was the most I could expect? Ah, there was where the laws of chance got in their play. The ceiling on interest in such banks was $7,500, but that didn't mean the original deposit couldn't have been even higher than that. I didn't bother figuring out what the maximum could be. It wasn't likely to be the maximum, any more than it was likely to be the minimum. The probabilities were all that it would hit somewhere in-between. That answered the first question. It was worth trying.

The second was: Can I get away with it?

The first thing they'd ask me was what the original amount was. How was I going to answer?

That didn't stop me. I wasn't going to. I just didn't know, that was all. After fifteen years, wasn't it natural if I'd forgotten? If I didn't remember having the account itself until I saw my own name in the paper, how could they expect me to recall how much was in it?

That took care of that.

Next, I'd have to verify my identity in some way, prove it. They weren't just going to hand out the money to me on demand. Just how did they check? I couldn't inquire ahead, that would be tipping my hand. I had to prepare myself, unaided, the best I could.

Every depositor has to sign his own name on a reference-card. First of all, handwriting. That didn't worry me so much; handwriting can change in fifteen years. If the discrepancy turned out to be too glaring, I could always plead some disability during the intervening years, rheumatism or joint-trouble that had cost me the use of my hands for a while and forced me to learn to write all over again. I might get away with it. Something else did worry me, though.

Every depositor is asked his age when he opens an account, whether it's transcribed in his own handwriting or that of the bank-official. How was I to guess the right age that went with any of these names? That was one thing I couldn't plead forgetfulness of. Even after fifteen years, I was expected to know my own age.

Another requirement: the given name of one parent, preferably the mother. That was another thing you didn't forget all your life.

An impossibility. Here were two factors in which the laws of chance were manacled, had no opportunity whatever to operate in my favor.

For a minute or two I was on the point of giving the whole thing up. I wouldn't let myself. The paper kneaded into ridges at the margins

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with the stubborn determination of my grip on it. I said to myself: "Don't quit. Don't be yellow. Some way may come up of getting around those two hitches. Try it anyway. If you don't try it, you'll go on sitting on a park bench, reading newspapers out of a bin. If you do try it, you've got a 50–50 chance. Which prospect appeals to you most?"

That didn't need any answer.

So I was going to do it. I had nothing to lose, everything to gain, and here I went.

But now the most important thing of all. Which name? Who was I going to be? In one way, it didn't make much difference which one I picked. In another, it made all the difference in the world. One of these names might bring me $1,000; the very next one under it might bring only twenty. One might spell immunity, its rightful owner might be dead; the very next one might mean sure-fire exposure. But there was no way of controlling this, it was ruled by sheer unadulterated chance. That being the case, the way to choose was by sheer unadulterated chance as well.

I turned the page over, covering the ad. I took a pin I had in my lapel, and I circled it blindly a couple of times, and then I punched it through, from the back. Then I turned the page back again, with the pin skewering it, and looked to see where its point was projecting.

It had pierced the "e" of Nugent, Stella.

I grimaced, got ready to try it again. That was one thing I couldn't be, a woman. Then I happened to look closer as I withdrew the pin.

Nugent, Stella, in trust for Lee Nugent, 295 Read Street.

Good enough. She was probably dead, and he must have been a kid at the time. That made it a lot more plausible. I would have had a hard time shaving fifteen years off my own right age without putting myself back into short pants.

I folded the paper and put it in my pocket. That was me, from now on. Sink or swim, win or lose, that was me.

Less than an hour later I was reconnoitering Read Street, on the odd-numbers side. I came to 291 halfway down the block, and right after that there was a triple-width vacant lot. The building had been torn down, and so had the ones on either side of it.

But I wasn't ready to give up yet. I loitered there, scanning the other buildings roundabout. They were all pretty old. If there had ever been a building in that vacant gap, these survivors were easily its contemporaries. But you can't ask a building questions.

I watched the people that occasionally came or went from the doorways. Kids were no good to me. Neither were the younger grown-ups. I needed someone good and old. Finally I saw what I wanted. She was about 70 and she'd come to one of the ground-floor windows in the building

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directly opposite the empty space, to water some geraniums.

I sauntered over, trying not to seem too anxious. I didn't know how to begin, but the old are like children, you don't have to be quite so wary with them. I tipped my hat. "I'm a real estate man looking over likely sites for development, ma'am." Her eyesight couldn't have been too keen, or I'd never have gotten away with that in my shabby condition. "Could you tell me about how long ago the buildings over there were torn down?"

"They weren't torn down," she piped. "They had a big fire there once, and then they just cleared away what was left of them afterwards."

"Oh, I see," I said politely. "You couldn't tell me about just how long ago that was?"

"Ages ago. That was before even we moved around here, and we've been living here the longest of anybody on the whole block."

That ended that. I'd been hoping against hope that I could get some sort of an indirect line on —

A younger woman appeared in the background, said, "Grandma, don't do so much talking!," darted me a suspicious look — suspicious just on general principles — and drew grandma back inside with her.

I turned and drifted away. I didn't want to ask questions of anyone else; too many questions weren't good. If she hadn't known, nobody else would. I was little better off than I had been before. There once *had* been a 295 Read Street. But I still didn't know if there'd ever been anyone named Nugent living in it. Or if there had been, how old he'd been.

I roamed around, without straying very far from the immediate neighborhood. I didn't actually know what I was looking for — or that I was looking for anything — until I'd suddenly sighted it: a red-brick building with a yawning wide-open ramp for an entrance. There was a Dalmatian stretched out on the sidewalk in front of it. I stopped to caress him. Then from that I worked into a harmless, friendly chat with the fireman sitting by in his suspenders reading a newspaper. He was graying and looked as though he was nearing the retirement age.

Something like this: "Keeping pretty busy these days?"

"Oh, we're still getting them now and then."

"Had any real big ones?"

"Not lately."

"That must have been a pretty big one that took down those three buildings over on Read Street. Know where I mean?"

"That was before my time," he said. "Yeah, that was a wow, from what I've heard. Five-bagger."

"No kidding?" I said, continuing to play with the Dalmatian's ear. "About what year was that?"

"Oh — fifteen, seventeen years ago. I used to hear some of the older fellows speak of it. Spring of '24, I guess. Well, it was either '24 or '23, somewhere thereabouts."

Just a harmless little chat, about

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nothing much at all. It stopped after that. "Nice dog you've got there." I ambled on.

I had a little something more now. I went, from there, to the reference room of the main library and I put in a requisition for the bound volume 1922–23 of the *Herald-Times*. It split like that, in the middle of the calendar year. I started at January 1, 1923, and worked my way from there on. Just skimming headlines and inside-page column-leads. If it had been a five-alarm fire it must have made headlines at the time, but I wasn't taking any chances on how accurate his memory was; he'd gotten it second-hand after all, and with firemen a blaze never shrinks but enlarges.

It was slow work, but in an hour and a half I'd reached the end of the volume. I went back and changed it for 1923–1924.

It came up after about another half-hour or so of page-scanning. I couldn't very well have missed it. It was all the way over in November, so that fireman's accuracy as to time of year hadn't been so hot after all. At least he'd approximated the year. I finally found it on November 5:

TENEMENT HOLOCAUST TAKES 5 LIVES

I didn't care much about the details. I was looking for proper names, hoping against hope. The five dead were listed first. Rabinowitz, Cohalan, Mendez — no, nothing there. Wait a minute, two unidentified bodies. Maybe it was one of them. I followed the thing through to the back. There it was, there it was! It seemed to fly up off the page and hit me in the eye like cinders. Nugent. I devoured the paragraph it was imbedded in.

A sudden gap in the smoke, caused by a shift of wind, revealed to the horrified spectators a woman and her two children balanced precariously on a narrow ledge running under the top-floor windows, their escape cut off by the flames mushrooming out both below and above them, at the fifth-floor windows and from the roof. The woman, later identified as Mrs. Stella Nugent, 42, a newcomer who had moved in only the day before, pushed both children off ahead of her into the net the firemen had hastily stretched out below to receive them, and then followed them down herself. All three landed safely, but it was found on examination that both children, Lee, 9, and Dorothy, 11, as well as the mother, had suffered badly-gashed throats, probably from thrusting their heads blindly through the broken glass of shattered window-panes to scream down for help. The mother lapsed into unconsciousness and little hope is held for her recovery. Neither child could give a coherent account of what had happened immediately preceding their appearance on the window-ledge, nor could it be learned at once whether there were any other members of the family —

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I went on to the next day's paper, the sixth. There was a carry-over in it. "Mrs. Stella Nugent, one of the victims of yesterday's fire on Read Street, died early today in the hospital without regaining consciousness, bringing the total number of casualties to —"

I went ahead a little further. Then on the ninth, three days later:

FIRE CLAIMS
SEVENTH VICTIM

Dorothy Nugent, 11, who with her mother and brother — etc., etc. — succumbed late yesterday afternoon from loss of blood and severe shock. The Nugent girl, although unharmed by the fire itself, suffered severe lacerations of the throat from broken window-glass in making her escape from the flat, a fact which has somewhat mystified investigators. Her younger brother, who was injured in the same way, remains in a critical condition —

I followed it through just to see, but that was the last, there wasn't any more after that. I quit finally, when I saw I'd lapped over into December. He'd either died by then or recovered, and either way it wasn't of topical consequence enough any more to rate mention. Just a tenement kid.

So I still didn't know one way or the other. But outside of that, I had about everything else, more than I'd ever dared hope to have! Given names, ages, and all! I had my age now. If he was nine in November 1923, I was 27 now. And by a peculiar coincidence, I was actually 26 years old myself.

But, of course, I wasn't George Palmer any more.

I was about ready. I had about all the background I'd ever have, so there was nothing more to wait for. Even the handwriting obstacle had melted away, since the account had been opened in trust for me and therefore I hadn't signed it anyway. I considered that an auspicious omen. Present identification wasn't very difficult. The prosperous, the firmly rooted, have a hard time changing identities. To a bird of passage like me, rootless, friendless, what was one identity more or less? No close friends, no business associates, to hamper my change of skin. I was just "Slim" to the few of my own kind who knew me by sight, and "Slim" could be anybody, right name Palmer or right name Nugent.

I took two days for present identification, that was all it needed. I realized of course that meanwhile, from one minute to the next, a real Nugent, the real Nugent, might show up, but I went right ahead.

That was one bracket of the 50–50 chance that I'd willingly accepted.

The two days were up, and now for it. I left myself looking pretty much as I was. To look too trim might invite suspicion quicker than to look down-at-heel, as I had been all along. I wasn't pretending to be anything other than what I was; I was only pretending my name was different.

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I headed for the bank and I went straight inside. I didn't hesitate, nor loiter around the entrance reconnoitering, nor pass back and forth outside it trying to get my courage up. My courage was up already. If I didn't plunge right in I was afraid it would start oozing away again.

I still had the original newspaper with me. I stalked up to one of the guards and I tapped the ad with my fingernail. "What do you do about this? My name's listed here." He sent me over to one of the officers, sitting at a desk in an enclosure to one side of the main banking-floor.

I repeated what I'd said to the guard. He pressed a buzzer, had the records of the account brought to him, to familiarize himself with them before doing anything further. Not a word out of him so far. I tried to read his face. He shot me a searching look, but I couldn't figure out what it was meant to convey. The documents were old and yellowed, you could tell they'd been on file a long time. He was holding them tipped toward him. I would have given anything to be able to see what was on them.

Finally he put them down, cleared his throat. This was the first test, coming up now. I knew there would be others, if I passed this one O. K. This was just the preliminary. I braced myself for it. "So you're Lee Nugent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any identification on you?"

I fumbled around in my clothing haltingly, as though I hadn't been expecting to be called on for documentary proof, was caught off-guard. I produced a carefully prepared scrap or two, just about as much as a fellow in my circumstances would have been likely to have on him. I wasn't counting on it to be enough, I'd known it wouldn't be. He shook his head. "Haven't you got anything more than that? We can't just turn over a sum of money to you, you know, on the strength of your word alone."

"I know that, sir," I said docilely.

He said: "Can you get anyone to vouch for you? Someone that's known you for several years?"

I'd expected that. For that matter, I could hardly have gotten anyone to vouch for me as George Palmer. That gave me the right line to take. I said, promptly and unqualifiedly, "No, I can't. Not one single person, as far as I know. You've got me there."

He spread his hands. "Why not? What's the matter?"

"I've been footloose, I've been drifting around. I've got acquaintances here and there, yes. They don't know me by name. I'm 'Slim' to most of them." I watched him. It was unsatisfactory in one respect, but I think it made a favorable impression, rather than otherwise. It sounded so plausible. It should have, it was true.

"Well, you've worked at times, haven't you?" He could tell by looking at me that I wasn't working right now, didn't have to ask that.

"Sure, whenever I could, which wasn't often."

I mentioned two or three jobs I'd

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actually had, which I knew wouldn't be any good to him. Hand-labor jobs in which my name hadn't even been down on any pay-roll, just "Slim" to the foreman and paid off in line according to bulk; fruit-picking jobs in orchards on the West Coast and stuff like that.

He took up the file-cards again. "Answer a few questions, please. Your age?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Date of birth?"

"I can't give you that," I said unhesitatingly. "You see, I lost both parents and my older sister when I was nine. If my mother ever told me what my exact birth-date was — and I guess she must have — I've forgotten it long since."

"Place of birth?"

"Right here." That was an out-and-out guess. If it had backfired, I was going to give him the small stall as on the previous question. I must have hit it right, I noticed he didn't pick me up on it.

"Mother's given name?"

"Stella."

"Can you give me her age at the time of her death?"

"She died in 1923 and she was 42 at the time."

"You didn't know of the existence of this account until now?"

"It's the first I ever heard of it. She may have told me at the time, I can't remember. If she did, I was just a kid, I didn't even know what she meant."

"No passbook, I suppose?"

"My mother lost her life in a fire. The passbook must have been destroyed along with all the rest of her belongings at the same time."

He put the checked answers away. He brought out some other kind of a paper, said, "Sign this."

I looked it over carefully. It was an application, a claim on the account. I wasn't afraid of the handwriting angle any more. I wrote "Lee Nugent" unstudiedly, unselfconsciously, in my own script. I let it stream out. I saw him watching intently as I did, to see if I'd hesitate or think twice.

He blotted for me. "All right," he said. "That's all for now. We'll notify you at —"

I gave him the name and address of a cheap lodging-house.

They were going to check. As far as they were able to, and that wasn't going to be terribly far.

I said, "Thanks," turned away. I hadn't expected to walk out with it then and there. I didn't. I hadn't even learned what the amount was yet. I didn't ask him; there was time enough for that. For the present, the main thing was to see if I was going to get it or not.

It came within three days after that. Came to the "desk" of this 30-cents-a-night flop-house where I'd been stopping for three days past as "Lee Nugent," in order to have some place to receive it. That was even quicker than I'd expected. It worried me a little. It didn't say one way or the other, when I'd tremblingly torn it open. Just a typed paragraph, neat and official looking.

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Kindly call at the bank in reference to Unclaimed Account Number 24,612.

I went up at once. It was harder to force myself to go inside than the first time. This was the crucial time, now. I could feel moisture at the palms of my hands, and I dried them against my sides before I pushed the revolving doors around. A temptation to drop the whole thing, back out while there was still time, even flitted briefly through my mind. "Keep walking, don't go in. You're still out of trouble. Stay outside, keep walking."

"To where?" I answered myself viciously. "A bench in the park again?" I flipped the door and went in.

I went straight over to him. He said, "Hello, Nugent," non-committally.

I said to myself: "This looks like it, this looks like it. He's accepted me under that name."

He got out all the data again, with new data that had been added to it since the last time. It made quite a sheaf by now. He patted it all together, and then he said: "What do you want to do, leave it in?"

I was getting it! I swallowed twice before I could trust myself to make an answering sound. I managed to bring out in a studious monotone, "Then it's O. K.?"

"We're satisfied it's rightfully yours. You want to withdraw it, that right?"

I sure did. The real Nugent might appear from one moment to the next. Even right while I was sitting there winding up the last of the transaction.

He said, "Sign this." This time it was a blank withdrawal slip. I passed it back and he filled in the rest of it for me himself. The date, the account number, most important of all — the amount involved. He wrote it in script, not ciphers, and it was upside-down from where I was; I still couldn't tell how much it was. He scrawled his official O. K. on it, sent it over to the teller by messenger. He said, "It'll take a minute or two," leaned back in his chair.

He kept looking at me. That added to my uneasiness. For a minute I was tempted to bolt and run, even at this late stage of the proceedings. It seemed to be taking a long time. Were they just using it for an excuse to hold me here while they sent out for the police?

Suddenly the runner was standing beside the desk again. He put down the file-card, with a sheaf of money clipped up against it. The card had been diagonally perforated "Canceled" to show that the account was closed out. The bank-official unclipped the money, separated it from the card, shifted it over to me. "There you are," he said and watched my face.

I was looking down at a hundred-dollar bill. My heart started to pick up speed. Over $100 — gee, it had been worth going to all that — I thumbed it. The second one from the top was a $100 bill too. Over $200; this was even better than I'd dared think; the third was still another

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— I couldn't go ahead separating them. My heart was rattling around in my chest like a loose bolt. I took a short-cut, reached out for the file-card, scanned it instead.

My eyes riveted themselves to that last group of numerals at the bottom, blurred, then cleared again by sheer will-power. Twelve hundred and — over $1000! Suddenly another zero had jumped up at the end, almost as though an invisible adding-machine was at work under my very eyes.

12010

I just looked at him helplessly. He nodded. He finished counting it out for me, since I was obviously too shaken to be able to do it for myself right then. Dazedly I saw 120 hundreds whirr through his deft fingers. And then a lone ten at the end.

"It's the biggest unclaimed sum we've turned over in years," he told me. "In fact, as far as I know, it's the biggest that's ever been held anywhere, since the law first went into effect. Sign this, please."

It was some kind of a quit-claim or acknowledgment. There had to be one in this case, because of the size of the sum involved and because I hadn't presented any passbook. Catastrophe flicked me with its dread wings — I just managed to swerve out from under them by a hair's breadth now, at the very end, with the money already counted out and turned over to me.

I was so stunned, so punchdrunk, that as I took up the pen I started to write George Palmer, my own name, my former name, I should say, from automatic force of long habit. I'd already formed the capital G when I caught myself doing it. Luckily, his eyes were off me at that instant, he was putting the money in an envelope for me. I quickly pushed down on the pen and a blot obliterated the damning initial completely. I started further over and scrawled "Lee Nugent" with a shaky hand.

He blotted it for me, put it away. I picked up the envelope stood up, and found my legs were a little unmanageable. I had to "lock" them at the knees to get them to work. He shook hands with me. "Sure you don't want to rent a safety-box with us, make sure of nothing happening to it? That's a lot of cash to be carrying around on you."

"No thanks, I'll take it with me," I mumbled. The one thing I was sure of was I wanted to get far away from there with it, and stay away. "Good day." I turned around and walked out, a little stiff-legged.

I could feel heads turning to look after me curiously as I made my way toward the revolving door. Something about the pallor of my face, I guess, or my jerky gait. Heads of people I didn't know, and who didn't know me. Or did they? Was there one among them that knew me, knew what had brought me there? I couldn't tell. I was Lee Nugent now. I didn't know whom I knew any more.

Sometimes I think they have a sixth sense, that other people don't

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have, that draws them unerringly to the right place at just the right time. As I came down the sloping steps to sidewalk-level, there were several others behind me leaving at the same time I did. Just as there were those making their way in. The bank was a busy one. But it seemed to me that one of them had kept on looking at me intently all the way out here, outside the bank. I was conscious of the "feel" of his eyes on the back of my neck, just as you are of any prolonged stare.

I stiffened the cords of my neck to keep my head from turning as it wanted to. I didn't want to meet anyone's eyes, lock glances with anyone. I just wanted to get into the street crowds and lose myself. I hurried along, close to the building line. Then, just before rounding the corner, I couldn't hold out, I cast a circumspect look over one shoulder.

No one had follwed me with their feet, but eyes were definitely following me, from back there at the bank entrance. Not just one face was turned my way, but two now. One of those who had left when I did had gone over to a small car standing at the curb. Both he and the man at the wheel were looking unmistakably toward me. I even caught one of them make a gesture pointing me out to the other. He didn't actually point, he sort of nudged down toward me with his thumb as if giving an order.

I didn't wait for any more. I hurried around the corner and out of sight. I quickened my gait, still trying to keep from an outright run, if possible. Before I could cover a third of the distance toward the next corner, which I again intended rounding, there was a hissing sound and the car had suddenly overshot me, braked against the curb a few yards ahead. One of them had stayed on the outside, clinging standing up to the door.

I stopped short, swerved, and started back the other way. I might have made it, but I ran full-tilt into one of these vagrant peddlers you see here and there on the downtown streets, carrying a shoulder-slung tray of razor blades or shoelaces out before him. The whole trayful went all over the sidewalk. Before I could get out and around him, the two in the car had leaped down and come up to me, one behind the other. I crouched back against the wall, at bay.

The one in the lead was jabbering as he closed in: "Your name's Lee Nugent and you just came into a whale of a big unclaimed deposit back there at the bank, right? How about a few words, what it feels like and what you intend doing —" And before I knew it the second one had fanned out from behind him, sighted a camera, and clicked it at me repeatedly.

Instead of being relieved I was more frightened even than when I'd thought it was a hold-up or some sort of retributive vengeance. That was the one thing I didn't want: pictures and publicity on it. That was the one thing that could make it end up bad for me.

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I reversed, rushed headlong out at them instead of away. The legman warned, "Look out for your camera, Bill, he's after it!" They both evaded me, jumped agilely aside. "Never mind, I'll write it on the cuff back at the office, let's clear out." They doubled back, regained the car, and it had streaked off again before I could stop them. I stood there staring after them with a mixture of premonitory fear and baffled fury coursing through me.

Then I turned and met the eyes of the poor devil of a street-vendor. Probably if he had stood there and snarled imprecations at me I would have told him to go to the devil, and hurried on my way. But he didn't, for some strange reason. He just stood there and looked at me in a sort of mildly reproachful way without saying a word, as though accepting this as just one more of the hard knocks he kept getting all day long. Something about that look on his face touched me. After all, he was me, twenty minutes ago. Except that I'd had the use of both of my legs and he was game-legged.

I moved over against the wall, took out the envelope, fumbled in it without letting anyone see me, turned back to him and handed him the odd ten that came with the 1201o. "Here," I said, "to make it square."

He just stared at me speechless. It gave me sort of a glow. It was as though I'd found myself a mascot, a living good-luck piece, to help ward off the evil that I could feel crowding close behind me. Long before he could stammer his thanks I was out of hearing and on my way again.

It had hit all the papers by six that evening. It was a natural, you couldn't blame them for playing it up. I didn't mind the write-ups so much; it was the pictures. All of them ran that one he'd taken, probably it had been distributed by some news-service. There was my face, caught for good. For thousands to look at. For the whole city around me to see. And somewhere among those thousands, somewhere in that whole city around me, might be — must be — the real Lee Nugent.

I was in a night-club with a redhead on one side of me, a blonde on the other, when I first became aware of him. I was in a different nightclub every night now, with a different blonde and a different redhead beside me every night.

At the third look he started to sink in. He was standing there by the entrance looking steadfastly over at me. At first sight there was nothing unusual in that. The place was small and overcrowded and there were plenty of people standing around, jawing and holding drinks. But he wasn't with anyone and he wasn't holding any drink. And he wasn't looking anywhere but over at my table, the direction of his head never changed. Not even at the girls with me, either; he kept his eyes on me and me alone. Not a muscle moved; he stood there impassive as a cigar-store Indian.

At the fourth look, the fourth I gave him, I mean, he tried to cover

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up. He was looking at the ceiling. Only there was nothing up there to see. And the first three looks had told the story. I said, trying to laugh it off: "Let's go some place else, that guy's getting on my nerves."

They didn't have a brain between the two of them. "Maybe he knows you, why don't you ask him over?" one of them giggled.

I said: "Quit staring at him. Start putting your faces on. I'll be right with you, I'm going out back."

I went back toward the men's room. Fortunately it was in the other direction, away from the front. There was an attendant there in a white jacket. I let him give me the works, brush-off, shoe-dusting, hair-tonic, talcum, anything to stay in there.

Then when he was all through, I eased the door a finger's width open and squinted out. By standing there in a certain position I could look straight out across the club proper, over to the entrance where he was. He hadn't stirred. His whole attitude expressed that terrible lethal patience that never tires, never gives up. I could see where he was looking now, too. It wasn't at the table any more. It was straight over at this very door, waiting for me to show up again.

"Is there any other way out of here?" I asked the attendant.

"No suh, this a one-way place."

I peered out again, and he had started to move. Time was up. I was taking too long to come back. He was coming in after me. There was no mistaking that. You could tell by the way he cut through the dancers, elbowed aside waiters and whoever happened to get into his way, eyes fixed straight ahead — at the door behind which I was standing. He meant business.

Conscience makes cowards of us all. There was no reason why I shouldn't stand there, find out what he wanted with me. But I couldn't — because I already knew, or at least had a pretty good idea. I wasn't entitled to this money I was throwing around right and left, it belonged to someone else. These spiffy clothes I was standing in, they weren't mine either. Every stitch I had on, from head to foot, from my underwear on out — belonged to somebody else.

I pointed to a narrow door right beside the main one. "What's that?"

"Closet where I keep my supplies, boss."

I peeled off another ten. It was always tens these days. "What would you do for one of these?"

"Practickly anything," was his frank answer.

I only had seconds. I hoisted up first one foot, then the other, wrenched off my patent dress-oxfords, handed them to him. "Put these on the floor in that cabinet over there. Side by side, where they can be seen from outside, as though there was somebody in them. Here's a jit to open it up with. There's a man on his way in — this $10 is for you to do something — anything — so I can get from the closet out that door without him seeing me."

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I backed into it, drew the door after me. It was lined with shelves, but there was enough space between them and the door for me to sandwich myself upright in; one week's high living hadn't been enough to put any paunch on me yet. I left the closet-door open by a hair's breadth, to be able to breathe and also so I could watch for a chance to slip out.

The other door winged inward, blocking the one I was behind. Then it receded again, and he was standing there. Motionless for a moment, like he had been outside against the wall. There were two things I didn't like about him. One was the look on his face, even though it was held profile-ward to me. It was bloodless and yet glowing, as if with the imminent infliction of death — on someone, by him — right in here, right now, no matter who was around, no matter where he happened to be. And the second thing I didn't like was the stance his right arm had fallen into. It was right-angled to the rear of him, elbow sharp in air, forearm slanted down under the tail of his coat, as if ready to bring out something. It was held still, frozen, like the rest of him.

To the attendant facing him from the line of gleaming washstands opposite, it might have seemed only as if he was fumbling for a handkerchief. But I was behind him, and I could see the wedge-shaped bottom of the hip-holster peering from under his coat.

The attendant was engaged in dumping talcum from a big square canister into a round glass bowl, to be set out on the shelf for the convenience of customers whose beards grew in too fast while they were patronizing the club. But he managed to get too much in, it piled up higher than the rim in a mound.

The man in the doorway took a slow step forward. He started, "Hey, you —" and backed up his thumb. I suppose he was going to tell him to clear out.

The attendant said, "Yessuh, gen'-man, whut'll it be?" but in his anxiety to please, he stepped out without watching where he put his foot, and it landed on the floor-pedal of a hot-air drier. The blast caught the cone of dumped talcum in the bowl he was holding head-on. There was suddenly a swirling blizzard over there, veiling the two of them as though they were in a fog. It was worth more than $10, it was worth $100.

The man facing him sneezed violently, so violently he floundered with it, staggered with it. A whole series of sneezes exploded from him, bending him over, blinding him, rendering him as helpless for those few minutes as a third-degree drunk.

Two quick, quiet steps in my bare socks took me from the closet to the outer door. I pared it open, sidled around the edge of it, and was outside.

I passed through the club a moment later in my bare socks, without stopping. I flung down a pair of tens at the table with the redhead and the blonde, said, "Sorry, girls, see you around," and was gone before their heads had

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even had time to turn around toward me. I knew the type, they wouldn't grieve long.

I hobbled painfully out across the hard cold sidewalk and jumped into a cab. I gave him the address of my hotel, and spent the first few blocks of the ride dusting off the soles of my feet between both hands. I'd have to change quarters right away, as soon as I got back. He'd be able to pick up the trail too easily, from back there at the club, now that he was once on it. Too many of those little numbers who frequented the place knew where I was stopping, had called me up now and then.

Just before we made the turn around the corner into the block the hotel fronted on, a light held us up. I I swore softly; every minute counted. But I should have blessed it instead of cursing it out. In the minutes that we were standing there motionless, there was a street light shining into the cab from almost directly overhead, and a figure suddenly launched itself out at us from the enshrouding gloom of the building-line, where it must have been lurking unseen. The driver had already thrown his brakes and begun to swing around by that time.

The human projectile caught onto the door-handle, was carried around the corner with us, managed to get it open and flounder in against me. I shied away instinctively along the seat before I saw who it was. It was my living talisman, the shoelace peddler. He'd made the immediate vicinity of the hotel his beat, ever since that first day. There wasn't one night, since then, that I'd failed, on coming home, to stop a minute by him and slip him another one of those tens.

I reached for my wallet to do it again right now. "Hullo, Limpy. You seem mighty spry tonight. Sorry I couldn't stop, I'm in kind of a rush —"

He motioned the offered money away. "That ain't why I stopped you, Mr. Nugent!" he said breathlessly. Meanwhile he was tugging at me by the shoulders, trying to draw me off the seat. "Get down! Get down low, where you can't be seen! And tell him not to stop, don't leave him stop in front of the hotel. Quick, tell him to keep on going straight through and turn the next corner. I'll tell you why after we get around there. Hurry up, Mr. Nugent, we're nearly there!"

I had to take his word for it. I didn't hesitate long. "Keep going, driver, don't slow up."

"What was it?" I asked.

"There's a guy waiting in the shadows across the way from the hotel-entrance for you to come back. I don't know what his game is, but he don't act like he's up to any good. I've been casing every car that came along for the past hour down there at the other corner, trying to head you off and tell you. Luckily it's a one-way street and they all got to slow up for the turn even when the light's with them."

"How do you know it's me he's waiting for?"

"There were two of them came up

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together first. I seen them stand and chat for a minute with old Pete, your hotel doorman. One of them went inside, maybe to see if you were in, then he came out again in a minute, and they shoved off. But not very far, just down around the lower corner there. I went up to Pete after they'd gone, I know him pretty well from hanging around here so much, and he told me they'd just been asking him kind of aimless questions about you. I went on down the line, pushing my pack, and when I got around the corner they were still there. They didn't pay any attention to me, and I've got a favorite doorway right there I hang out in in wet weather. I couldn't help overhearing a little of what they were saying, they were right on the other side of the partition from me. One of them said: 'I'll go back and keep the hotel covered. You start out and make a round of the clubs. See if you can put the finger on him. Don't close in on him, just tail him, stay with him. Between the two of us we ought to be able to get him.'

"Then they split up. One crossed over, got in a car, and drove off. The other one went back around the corner, but he stayed on the dark side, hid himself in the shadows. You couldn't tell he was there any more, after that, unless you knew like me."

"What'd the one that drove off in the car look like?"

He described him to the best of his ability. I knew by that he wasn't lying. It was the same man I'd seen at the club—the man I had narrowly evaded.

So there were two of them, instead of just one. The authentic Lee Nugent, if it was he, had someone working with him. Which was which didn't matter. Their intentions, obviously, went far beyond mere accusation, arrest, and juridical procedure. They wouldn't have gone about it the way they were, if that had been the case. They noticeably had avoided having the police participate.

And the expression I'd seen on the face of one of them, in that washroom, had been that of a killer as he closes in for the kill.

I reached out and gripped Limpy absently by one of his skinny shoulders while I was thinking it over. "Thanks, you're a real pal."

"That ain't nothing. One good turn deserves another. You've been swell to me ever since that first day you bumped into me on the street." He waited a while, watching me intently. "What're you going to do, Mr. Nugent?"

That was it, what was I? I pawed my chin a couple of times. "I don't know who they are or what they're out for," I lied for his benefit, "but I'm not going back there and get all tangled up with them."

"Why don't you go to the police, Mr. Nugent?"

"No, that's no good." I didn't tell him why. I had as much, possibly even more, to lose by police interference than they did. "I'm going to blow town for a while," I decided suddenly.

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Yes, that was it. I had the money now, one place was as good as another to enjoy it in. That was the best way of throwing them off the trail once and for all. Simply to change from one hotel to another would only win me temporary immunity.

I looked down at my sock-feet, wiggled my toes ruefully. "Look, there's something I have to have, though, and I can't go back to there myself and get it. You've been up to my place several times, you know the layout." I didn't know why, but I had a strong hunch I could trust him. "I'm going to take a chance on you, Limpy. Here's my key. Go up there and get me a pair of shoes out of the clothes-closet. That's one thing. And the second thing — now listen carefully. You know that little knee-high frigidaire in the serving-pantry? Open it up. Put your hand in where the ice-cube tray goes. Instead you'll find a flat tin box, locked. Pull it out, wrap it up in a towel or something, and bring it out with you."

I didn't tell him what was in it. There was roughly $11,000 in cash in it. I'd spent about $1,000 in the past week. I hadn't trusted it to any bank or even the hotel safe. I was glad now. It made it easier to get hold of at short notice, and without having to appear personally.

"The elevator boys all know you, and I'll phone in to the desk from outside and tell them I'm sending you over to get something from my rooms, so you won't be stopped on the way out. You bring it over to the station and meet me there. I'll be in the last row of benches in the waiting-room, against the wall, so my bare feet won't be noticed. I'll have a newspaper spread out full-width in front of my face. Look for me behind a spread-out newspaper."

"I can get in and out through the service entrance. That way, if they do happen to spot me, they won't think nothing of it. I know the hotel fireman, I've often gone down there to get warmed up in the cold weather."

"Make it as fast as you can, Limpy. There's a Midnight Flier I'd like to make."

As I watched him get out of the cab and disappear around the corner, I wondered if I'd ever see him again. Even though I hadn't told him, he was no fool; he must have a good hunch what was in such a box as I'd asked him to bring. Locked or otherwise, a chisel and hammer would open it in five minutes. It was a pretty strong temptation to put to a half-disabled down-and-outer like him.

Maybe, I thought shamefacedly, he's not like you, maybe he don't take what don't belong to him.

I put in my identifying call to the hotel and then I cabbed over to the station. I had enough money on my person to buy my Flier ticket ahead of time, without waiting for him. My socks were black, fortunately, and I forced myself to walk as naturally as possible, in order to avoid attracting attention to my feet. No one seemed to notice that my extremities ended in silk instead of shoe leather. I picked up

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a newspaper, sidled into the last row of benches in the waiting-room, and opened it out full-spread before my face.

I had sixteen minutes to go before train-time.

The first five minutes, he was coming and it was going to be all right. The second five, he'd let me down, he'd taken the cash-box and good-bye. I'd have to powder out of here as broke as I'd been a week ago, and when I got where I was going, the whole thing would start over — park-benches and papers out of bins. Then the next four minutes or so after that with the gates already open and that minute-hand on the wall creeping closer and closer to twelve, were a mixture of the two, hope and despair, with a third fear added for good measure. Maybe it wasn't his fault, maybe those guys waiting outside had caught on, had jumped on him and hauled him off with them as he came out.

Somebody coughed in front of my newspaper, and I tucked my head a little lower. The cough came again, like a double-take-em of the throat if there is such a thing. This was on the fourteenth minute.

I lowered the paper and Limpy was sitting there, in the seat right in front of me. He was turned sidewise toward me, holding up a paper of his own to screen him from the front. His arm hung down over the back of the seat toward me. An oddly shaped newspaper-wrapped bundle, obviously a pair of shoes, already lay on the floor beside me. The flat oblong of the strong-box, also newspaper-wrapped, came down beside them a moment later, from somewhere underneath his outer clothing.

"Boy," I exhaled softly. I'd never been so glad to see anyone in my life. I got on the shoes, and sheathed the long flat box in the waist-band of my trousers, upright against my side. It stayed there pretty securely, and without making a very noticeable bulge.

There was a minute-and-a-half yet before the train left. I couldn't resist asking him, as I stood up: "Limpy, did you have any idea what was in this box?"

"Sure," he said unhesitatingly. "Several thousands dollars in cash."

I stared at him, startled. "How did you know?"

"I couldn't help seeing it, the lid came open while I was wrapping it. You maybe thought you locked it the last time you took it out, but in your excitement or hurry you must have forgot to. It was open."

I just stared at him unbelievingly. "You're what I call an honest man, Limpy. There aren't many like you."

"But you're my friend, Mr. Nugent," he protested. "A guy don't do that to his friends."

"Sure no one followed you?" I said as we made our way toward the track.

"The two of them were still waiting there when I came away. The other guy had come back again. I guess they think you'll still show up there eventually from that club where you gave

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him the slip," he explained softly.

He came out to the train with me to see me off. There was less than a minute left now. A day-coach had been all I'd been able to get, at the last minute like that. I got aboard, found a seat by the window, and spoke to him on the platform outside, where he'd remained standing, through a two-inch opening left at the bottom of the pane, bending over so I could see him. The shade had been drawn down to match.

"Look," I said. "There's a lot of swell clothes, some of them I never had time to wear yet, and gadgets I'm leaving behind at the hotel. I want you to have them. The rooms have been paid for until tomorrow night. You still have the key. You go up there and take them with you."

"I couldn't do that, Mr. Nugent," he said disclaimingly. "F'rinstance, if I wore clothes that looked too good, it would kill my way of earning a livelihood. But I'll take your belongings over to my place and look after them for you there, until you come back to town. I'll give you my address, so you'll know where to find me. Or in case you want them forwarded, drop me a line. Just Limpy Jones. I got a room on the third floor, over at 410 Pokanoke Street. You can remember that name, can't you?"

"Look, Limpy, I want to do something for you —" I protested to him vehemently.

"Four ten Pokanoke Street," he insisted.

Somebody had dropped heavily into the seat beside me. I lowered my voice so I wouldn't be overheard. "I'll never forget what you did for me tonight. I'm O. K. now, the train'll be pulling out in a few more seconds. Take care of yourself, Limpy."

"Lots of luck, Mr. Nugent," he said. He turned and drifted away through the groups on the platform. There went a swell guy, I said to myself.

I sank back in my seat, tilted my hat well down on the bridge of my nose to shade my eyes, and prepared to doze.

I pushed my hat up off my eyes again and turned to the man beside me. "Pardon me, would you mind taking your elbow out of my ribs, I'm trying to take a little nap here."

"That ain't my elbow," was the casual answer.

I looked and it was a gun. He had his right arm tucked under his left, and the gun came out just about where his left elbow would have been.

The wheels had given their first jerky little turn under us. "Time we were getting off, isn't it?" He was as matter-of-fact about it as though we were a couple of fellow-commuters riding out to the same station together of an evening. That was the deadly thing about him; no tension, no pallor, no strain, like that fellow to the washroom.

"You can't hijack me off the middle of a crowded train, gun or no gun."

"The gun ain't the important part," he agreed languidly. "The tin is. "His hand came out of his vest, showed it

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to me, put it back again. "The gun is just to hold you still so you'll take time to look at it." The wheels were starting to pick up tempo. He raised his voice authoritatively, so that it would reach the vestibule. "Hold that door, conductor, two rain-checks!" And to me: "Get going."

I walked down the aisle ahead of him, made the transfer to the platform beginning to sidle past, and he hopped off at my heels, without breaking the twist he had on my arm.

He stopped there a moment and frisked me, in full sight of everyone, while the train hurtled by. "What's this?" he said, when he came to the tin box.

"Money."

He transferred it to his own outside coat-pocket. "All right," he said, "now if you don't want the bracelets in front of everyone, just walk quietly out through the station with me."

I began walking. A dick. And all along I'd thought it was a matter of personal vengeance on the part of the real Lee Nugent. "What's it for?" I asked him as we made our way back across the main rotunda.

He gave me a halfway smile. "What're you trying to do, kid me? You don't know, do you? You haven't the slightest idea. Are you Lee Nugent or aren't you?"

Sure, it had to do with that. They must have changed their minds, turned it over to the police, when they found I'd slipped through their own fingers. What could I do but brazen it out? "I'm Lee Nugent," I answered crisply. "And that money is rightfully mine."

"Glad to hear it," he said drily. "Nobody's talking about the money. You're wanted for murder. Long time no catch. But all that publicity you got a couple days ago sure dropped you in our laps pretty. Pictures 'n everything. Brother, you must think we don't keep records and haven't got good memories."

I'd taken sudden root on the mosaic flooring. Even the gun couldn't get me to stir for a second. So that explained why the account hadn't been claimed! The original Nugent had known better than to show up, 12,000 or no 12,000. And I like a fool had walked straight into the trap!

"No, wait — listen to me a minute — I'll make a clean breast of it, I'm not Lee Nugent. I crashed that account. My right name is —"

He smiled humorlessly. "So now you're not. A minute ago you were. You sure change fast. Keep moving."

I stumbled on out to the street beside him. They must have fingerprints and things like that on record; I could clear myself, I could prove I wasn't the same individual. But suppose they didn't, suppose it was just one of those circumstantial cases —

We'd stopped beside a car standing waiting a short distance down from the main entrance to the station. There was one other man in it, in civilian clothes, at the wheel. He swung the door open as we neared it. The dick collared me into the back ahead of him and then got in after me.

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Neither he nor the driver said anything to one another, and the car started off without any instructions being given.

"Look," I began again in another minute or two, "I tell you I'm not Lee Nugent. There must be a difference in our descriptions, there must be something that'll —"

"Don't tell it to me," he said with stony unconcern, "tell it where we're going when we get there — if it'll do you any good. Personally, I don't give a hoot who you are. To me you're just a guy I was sent out to bring in."

I didn't speak again for a while — what was the use? — until a wrong street had ticked by, and then a second and a third. I looked out sharply, and then sharply back to them. "This isn't the way to headquarters."

Something darker than the overtones of the official arrest began to descend on me; an oppressive sense of doom, a complete extinction of hope. The police, though they may err at times, at least are not vindictive just for the sake of being so. Private vengeance is.

I hardly noticed the direction they took me; what difference could background make at a time like this? It was all a blur of shadows heavy-laden with imminent death. I knew in my heart this was a one-way journey.

When the car stopped finally, I was vaguely aware of the dim outline of some large house directly before us. I was hustled inside before I could further identify it. The driver of the car as well as the man who had seized me on the train both came inside with me. The door opened as we reached it, as though we had been sighted beforehand. I tried to turn my head and see who had been behind it, but the hand of one of my captors caught me tightly at the back of the neck, just below the skull, and held me rigid there while they continued to thrust me forward between them.

I was shoved into a room in which there was a cobblestone fireplace and wood panelling on the walls. Whatever this place was, it was fitted up as though it was used for dwelling purposes, was someone's residence. There were two men in it, waiting for us. One standing, the other negligently balanced across the corner of a heavy table, one leg dangling short and repeatedly flipping an open jackknife in air and catching it almost miraculously each time by the flat of the *open blade* between two fingers before it could bite into the polished tablesurface. The one standing was the man I had given the slip to at the night-club.

He came forward and he said: "Here. You forgot something." And he let me have one of my own patent dress-shoes full in the face. It stunned me for a minute. I went back against the table, and the ones who had come in with me held me up between them. I heard one of them say: "Don't do that till Ed sees him."

One of them left the room, and there was a short wait. Then he reappeared followed by a short, heavy-

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set man. The latter was fully dressed, but he was in the act of shrugging on his jacket as he came through the doorway. He buttoned it, then he raised both hands and smoothed back his stringy black hair, as though he'd been taking a nap fully-dressed when they summoned him. He appeared to be in his early forties, and he was probably younger than he looked. The others drew back from me as he came on, I noticed, as though to give him plenty of room.

He walked all around me two or three times, looking me up and down, almost like a fitter in a clothing-store inspecting someone trying on a new suit. "Uh-huh," he grunted affirmatively a couple of times, "uh-huh." Then he stopped finally, directly before me. "So this is what you're like."

I said, a lot more defiantly than I felt: "You're not the police. What's this for, what's it about?"

"We're our own police."

"What're you doing with me here, exactly what do you want with me?"

He withdrew to the other side of the table, ensconced himself in a swivel chair, cocked one leg up over the other, stripped a cigar. One of his henchmen supplied the match.

Finally, when I thought he was never going to speak again, "I'm Eddie Donnelly," he said. "Mean anything to you?"

"No, because I'm not —"

"It should," he overrode me. "Well it would to your father, if he hadn't been smart enough to die before I could get my hands on him."

"I haven't any fa —"

Again he bore me down. "Maybe I should refresh your memory. Joe Nugent, your father, and mine were partners. A crooked partner and a partner that was honest. The crooked one swindled the honest one, and hundreds of other people that trusted the honest one besides. Then he disappeared, and let the innocent one take the rap for him. It's an old story, old as the hills. But I never yet grew tired of repeating it. Because it happened to me and mine!"

His face darkened. "My father went to jail, for something he didn't do. Yours hid his family out of sight for a while, and went off by himself, out of reach, to another country, where he lived off the fat of the land on stolen money, waiting for things to blow over. But it didn't end there. My father died in jail. He never came out alive again. It killed him just as surely as a gun or a knife. He was murdered. They took me up to see him near the end. Yes, I was just a kid, but they took me up to see him, that was his last request. And his dying words to me were: 'Get even for us, Eddie. Get even on that man that's done this to us, on him and his, if it takes all your life.' I swore I would, and I keep my oath to a dying man."

He flung down his cigar, as though the memory of all this made it taste bad. "I saw my mother scrub floors on her hands and knees, until she died too, years before her time, a worn-out

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drudge. I saw my sister — well something even worse happened to her, because there was no one to give us a home any more. I grew up on the streets myself, and then in reform school. All because my birthright was taken away from me.

"But I had one thing through it all to keep me going. My oath to get even. And it still hasn't been fulfilled. I caught up with him years later. I tracked him down until I'd caught up with him. And I was just too late. Just a few weeks too late. He'd died safe in bed, in the beautiful mansion that blood-money had bought him. He'd died a respected, honored, adopted citizen in that second home of his in a foreign land. I couldn't take that away from him. My oath went unfulfilled. But I knew he had a son somewhere. A son he was too cowardly to come back and acknowledge." His fist came down with a sound like thunder. "And now I've got his son. That's something even better!"

"Only you haven't," I said. "I was born George Palmer. I never heard of any Lee Nugent until a few short days ago. I picked the name at random out of a newspaper because I saw there was some money waiting to be claimed, and I went down there and impersonated him. You've got the wrong guy. You've got a fake, a phony. What good is it to your vengeance to get even on somebody entirely different? I haven't got the blood of your father's enemy in my veins —"

To my surprise he'd shut up completely. I hadn't thought it would be this easy to convince him. Suddenly, for some reason or other, he seemed uncertain. They were all looking at him curiously, I saw. He made a steeple of his fingertips and poised them before his mouth. "It's always possible, of course," he said quietly, "that me and my fellows here have made such a mistake. Isn't it, boys?"

He turned and looked hard at them, one by one. I saw the corners of his eyebrows quirk upward. Then he turned back to me again. "I don't want to be too hasty. I've waited a long time. I can afford to wait just a little longer, for the sake of being sure. Suppose I send down to your old neighborhood, bring someone up here and see if they recognize you. There's no one has such long memories nor such keen eyesight for familiar faces as old-time neighbors —" He was soft as silk now; he was good. "Naturally, I don't mean where you were first raised, you were too small then," he interposed smoothly. "I mean from where you moved to after that, from where he hid you out later —" He snapped his fingers helplessly a couple of times, like you do when you're trying to remember a name.

"Read Street?" I blurted out incautiously. "But they weren't there long enough —"

"What d'you mean they weren't there long enough?" he said glibly.

"There was a fire, the very first night after they'd moved in. The building at 295 burned down and —" I clamped my jaws shut too late, felt like biting off my tongue.

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He didn't do anything for a minute. There was silence. Then he turned and looked at the others like he had before. With the same quirk to his eyebrows. As if to say, "See?"

But there wasn't a smile on any of them, him included. He turned back to me.

"You've told us who you are out of your own mouth," he said with soft ferocity. "If you weren't Lee Nugent how would you know the street and the very house-number you lived at as a kid? How could you know there was such a fire, in which your mother and sister lost their lives, but in which you were saved — for me, here, today?"

He got up and came over to me. He gave me the back of his hand across my mouth, back and forth, three, four, five times. It sounds light, the back of a hand; it wasn't. He had a heavy ring on it. It opened my lip the second time, it widened the split on the back-swing. It chipped the enamel from my front teeth the time after. By the time he quit there were thin strings of red running down criss-cross all over my chin.

"Take him outside," he said, "and put on your best hats, we're all going to a funeral."

They put me in the back again, one on each side of me. He sat in front, next to the driver. He rode turned halfway around in the seat, facing me over the back of it, so that he could gloat all the way.

People have been taken for rides before. I kept telling myself that; it was all I had. They died at the end of it, and then it was over. It only took a few minutes. All right, they were going to show me my own grave at the cemetery, readied years beforehand, he'd told me just now as we got in. Then they'd make me climb down into it, most likely, and then they'd shoot me. People had died in worse ways than that. Sewn up in gunny-sacks, so that they strangled themselves. Dropped into the river with their feet stuck into buckets of cement.

And meanwhile, he kept riding sidewards on the seat, looking back at me, arm slung over the seat-top. He couldn't wait until we got there, that might have spared me ten or fifteen minutes premonitory agony of mind. No, he had to tell me now, ahead of time, so I'd have that much added horror to look forward to.

"You think you're going to be stretched out in it dead, don't you?" he smiled. "My father was buried alive. That's what that jail amounted to. We'll do as much for you. We've got a length of copper tubing, with a little nozzle. D'you get what I mean? You'll last for hours, maybe days. He lasted *years!*" A mouth wasn't meant to smile like that; to call such a thing a smile was sacrilege. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," he said softly.

I raised my face toward the ceiling of the car and drew in a slow, cold, shuddering breath. I shivered as it went down me. He was getting what he wanted; anticipation was sheer unadulterated agony. One of the oldest

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instincts of man is fear of being put into the ground alive.

He all but licked his lips. If he didn't that was the expression in his eyes as he watched me. Then something the driver did took his attention off me for a moment. He turned his head around forward. "No, you should have taken the other one, Chris. This won't get you anywhere." He was indulgent about it, though. I was his only hate in the world. He could forgive anyone else anything, tonight. "Back up to the intersection we just crossed and turn right into Hallowell Avenue, that's the shortest way."

"Sorry, chief," the driver mumbled, crestfallen. "I thought this one was just as good." He went into reverse. "Wasn't watching."

"Naw, this is Pokanoke Street, this won't take us anywhere. It just runs on for a while and then quits cold. You'd only have to shuttle back over again when you got to the end of it —"

The name sank in, the funny name, like a pebble thrown into a dark pool, and went plunging downward through layers of memory. Pokanoke Street, Pokanoke Street. That name, there was something I had to remember — No there wasn't, it didn't matter, what was the difference? I was going to be dead in a little while, what good would a street-name do me?

There was a moment or two of awkward maneuvering, while he guided the car backward, erasing the slight error of direction he'd made. I suppose he thought it was simpler than making a complete loop around and facing the other way, only to have to reverse a second time a few moments later for the new start. There wasn't anything behind us in a straight line, his mirror showed him that, but as our rear backed out into the open past the corner-line, a lightweight truck came at us from the transverse direction without any warning.

The two things happened at once. The plunging pebble struck bottom in the pool of my memory, and the truck sideswiped the back of the car, shunted it out of the way, and sent it lashing around in a long shuddering skid against the pull of its own brakes, that momentarily threatened to overturn it.

Limpy. A helping hand, waiting down there along that street. Refuge if I could only get to it. Sanctuary. It's true he was only a lame peddler, but he had a door that would let me in, and close them out. The only friendly door in the whole length and breadth of the town —

There were four of them around me in the car. And only one — the driver — without a gun either already in his hands or within such short reach of his hands that it amounted to the same thing.

But the odds had suddenly evened out in my favor. For, while the car rocked from side to side and threatened to topple from one instant to the next, they were all afraid of dying, death was all they had time to think of. I'd been afraid of dying all along, long before they were, so I was ready

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for it, and now life was all I could think of.

I freed the gun from the hand of the man next to me on my right. His grip had become so nerveless that I didn't even have to wrench it from him. I just plucked it from his loose fingers. That meant I had it by the bore and that was the way I wanted it, it saved me the trouble of reversing it. I hitched it against the ceiling and chopped down backhard into the middle of his forehead with it, square between the two eyebrow-bulges. Then I freed the door on that side and made a circular hop out past his relaxing knees. The car hadn't even finished its burning skid yet. They were all still suspended between two worlds.

Ed Donnelly turned just in time to see me go, then reversed to try to get me on that side. "Hold onto him!" I gave him the gun-butt the flat way, across his teeth. He got his hands on it blindly, as though he were a glutton cramming something into his own mouth. I let it go. His whole head was well-shocked, he couldn't use it.

By the time the first shot came, I was already sprinting up Pokanoke Street. It was a soft, spongy sound I didn't recognize for a shot. It was like a soggy paper bag crunching open. Silencer. I swerved in closer to the building-line and kept hurtling along.

410. 410, he'd said. 410 alone was life, and every other doorway spelled death. Their badges, their phony tin badges would open them, pull me out.

The crunching sound came again, but it was further behind me now.

The doorways kept ticking off, like uprights of a black picket-fence, I was going so fast. Most were dark. I flashed past one with a dim light behind its grubby fanlight. 395. I was on the wrong side, but it was right over there, just a few doors ahead.

I had to get over. I didn't slacken, but I launched myself out on a diagonal, away from the sheltering building-line, and that was when they got me. They got me halfway over; I guess I showed better against the empty middle of the street. It made me miss a step, but then I went right on as though nothing had happened.

It was like the prickling of a needle first. That was all, nothing more. Then a sharper pain bored its way in more slowly, as though an awl was being rotated in its wake. Then came heat, as though the awl were generating friction. Then fire, then agony, then approaching collapse.

400. 402. They were coming now. Something had held them up, they hadn't been able to start right out after me. Most likely the truck that had participated in the collision had halted a short distance off around the corner and its occupants got out to parley for a minute. They'd been held there against their wills a minute or two, until they could get rid of them, even though one had ventured the muffled potshots in the meantime that had gained their object. Now the running splatter of their feet suddenly surged out after me in the silence up

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there; it echoed forebodingly.

I had to get in off the street. I couldn't make another doorway. I couldn't get there. This was only 406, still three houses away, but this was as far as I could go. I fell twice, once outside the threshold and once inside. The feet were coming nearer. I picked myself up and zig-zagged back to where some stairs began.

I pulled the steps down toward me with my hands, got up them that way, scrambling on all fours like somebody going up a treadmill. I got to the first landing, reared upright, fell again, clawed up another flight of steps.

They got there. They made a blunder outside the door that gained me another flight, a third. They went on past, one doorway too many. I could hear them arguing. "No, it's this one back here, I tell you! I seen him!"

They'd doubled back now, and come in after me, down below. I could tell by the hollow tone their bated voices took as soon as they were in out of the open. "This is it. See the blood-spots across the doorway?"

Two of them must have preceded the others. There was a short, surreptitious whistle, by way of signal. "In here."

And then an order from Donnelly, in a husky undertone: "You two stay out there, me and Chris'll go in after him. Bring the car down this way and keep it running. Keep your eyes on all these doors along here, he may try to cross over the roofs and come out one of the others —"

I could hear every word, through the silence, up there where I was. And they could hear me, wrenching at the last barrier of all, the roof-door that ended the stairs, warped and half-unmanageable, but held only a rusted hook and eye on the inside. "Listen, he's up above there, hear him?"

I was out now, in the dark, stars over me, gravel squashing away from under my feet. I kept going blindly, in the same direction as down below in the street. A low brick division-rampart, only ankle-high, came up. That meant 408 was beginning. I had to keep count, or I'd go too far. I couldn't raise my feet that high any more, to step over it. I had to kneel on it and let myself fall over to the other side. I got up again, it got wet all over again where the bullet had gone in, but I managed to pull myself up again.

I stumbled on. Those stars were acting funny, they kept blurring and swirling, like pinwheels. Another brick partition came up. I crawled over that full-length, like an eel. This was 410 now. This was safety, down under my feet somewhere. Only his door, his was the only one was any good against that tin badge.

I found the roof-door, in the little hutch it fitted into. And then—something was the matter. It would come out just so far, about a hand's breadth, and then it wouldn't come out any further. That same hook and eye arrangement on the inside, like the other. I pulled and strained at it, but I didn't have enough strength left —

And behind me, two rooftops away,

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I heard the gravel scuff as they came out after me. There was a wink of light from one of them as though he'd lit a match, but it wasn't that. There was another of those crunches.

I'll never know just what it was. I don't think it could have been the bullet, such a thing happens only in fairy tales. But I hadn't been able to open it until now, the hook was in the way, holding it back. And all of a sudden, after that flash, the hook wasn't there any more, the door swung out free for me.

I got down the first flight, inside, on my own feet, although sometimes they were too far behind and sometimes they were too far out in front of me. But the next one I couldn't make standing up any more, I fell all the way down. Not head-first, but in a sort of diagonal slide on my back. And then I just lay flat.

This was the third floor. It was one of these doors. But I was still as far away as I had been outside, or back in the car. All that travail for nothing. A thought passed through my mind: why do you want to live this bad? They have the money now, you have nothing. Just a bench in the park, just a paper out of a bin.

Give me that, I breathed, but let me live.

There was a door just inches beyond my numb, outstretched arm lying along the floor. I couldn't move those few inches. I couldn't reach it.

I heard another one open, somewhere behind me, as though the sound of my sliding fall just now had attracted someone's attention. Feet moved toward me and stood there before my glazing eyes.

Someone's arms dug under me, and I was hoisted up, propped against the wall. My blurred vision cleared for a moment, and Limpy's face came through. It blotted, then came into right focus.

"They're coming down after me," I breathed hoarsely. "From up there. And there are others waiting down below outside the door. I haven't any place to go but here —"

He just stood looking at me.

I reached out and caught him weakly by the shoulder. "Limpy, it's me, don't you know me, can't you see my face? What're you standing waiting for like that? Take me inside with you, close the door. Don't you want to save me?"

They were opening the roof-door. He still didn't move. But he spoke at last.

"Would *you?*" he said. "Would you if you were me? You see, I happen to be — the real Lee Nugent."

My first day out of the hospital, I came along a pathway in the park. It could have been any pathway, they were all alike to me and I had nowhere to go, but it happened to be that particular one. I slumped down on a bench.

I sat there thinking over what had happened that night. How he'd hauled my half-conscious form inside with him at the last minute, after they were already clattering down the

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stairs; barred the door and shoved things up against it to hold them off for awhile. "Sure, I'm Lee Nugent," I'd heard him say softly, "but you're still my friend."

I suppose they would have gotten us there, in the end, though — the two of us together, the real and the fake, instead of just me alone. There was no telephone, no weapon, not even an outside window through which to call for help.

But those truck-drivers who had been in the collision earlier with the death-car hadn't been as gullible as they had appeared to be. They went straight to the police from there, reported a car from which a man had been seen to break away, followed by suspicious flashes that might have been silenced shots, and gave its license number. The cops closed in in turn around them, and jumped them just as the door was splintering under their vicious assault, caught them pretty, the whole lot of them. The two who had stayed behind were picked up later. Donnelly and one other guy had been shot dead in the fracas.

And that was about all. Except, and this came weeks later, I was free to leave the hospital whenever I was in condition to go. Lee Nugent, the real Lee Nugent, didn't want me held, was willing to drop all charges against me. He felt I'd been punished enough already for my week of stolen high life, and if it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have been able to come into unhampered enjoyment of the money himself.

So here I was back where I'd started, slumped on a bench in the park, staring meditatively down at the ground before me. I heard a car brake in the driveway out front, and footsteps approached.

I stared at the expensive custom-made shoes and then on up to his face. He was smiling. "They told me you'd checked out when I tried to find you at the hospital just now. I've been looking for you. Don't take offense now, but there's something that I want to do, I won't be happy until it's off my mind. I'm a firm believer in completing the circle of events, ending things where they began." And he took out his wallet and handed me a ten-dollar bill, one of those same tens I used to give him all the time. "Remember?" he grinned.

He turned and went back to the car. I just sat there holding it in my hand, looking after him. Gee, life was screwy.

He waited a minute by the wheel. Then he beckoned me. "Come on," he called over genially, "get in. You don't want to sit there on a bench in the park. We should stick together, you and me, we've got a lot in common."

George Palmer went over and climbed in beside Lee Nugent, and the two of us drove off together.

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FALSE CLAIMANT DEPT.: *The Witch of Times Square*

by ELLERY QUEEN

IF LAST YEAR YOU HAD ASKED Father Bowen of All Souls-off-Times Square whether or not he subscribed to the Deuteronomic doctrine of an eye for an eye, he would have rebuked you — being a good Anglican — and cited some St. Jamesian reminder, probably Matthew v, 38–39, on the Case of the Reversible Cheek. Put the question to him today and Father Bowen is more likely to quote that profane authority, Ellery Queen, on the Case of the False Claimant.

Father Bowen's flock being pastured in the West Forties, it is plentifully mixed with black sheep. Until last year one of his sorriest blessings was a gay old ewe known to the touts, newspaper vendors, bartenders, carny boys, cops, and other habitués of Broadway as the Witch — a hag with lank gray-blonde locks, cheeks like bark, and runny blue eyes, who wore sidewalk-length skirts, an outrageous shawl, and a man's fedora which came from some night-club trash can. The Witch lived alone in a basement hole over towards Tenth Avenue, and she bounded forth at night to sell violets, corsages of gardenias, and policy tickets under the marquees and neon signs. Towards morning — she was of English blood, her name being Wichingame — she could usually be found at some all-night bar before a long row of empty gin-and-tonic glasses, singing *Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning* in a hoarse, joyful voice. Her record of attendance at All Souls was not meritorious, although she could be depended upon in the confessional, where she went into enthusiastic detail.

Her pastor labored hard in this exasperating vineyard, but he had no cause to rejoice until one winter week, when the Witch mistook the new snowfall on her sidewalk for the coverlet of her bed and awakened in Bellevue Hospital with a case of double lobar pneumonia. She was very ill, and at some time during her sojourn in the Valley she saw the Light. She sent for Father Bowen, and when she clanged home in a jubilant ambulance she was a permanently repentant sinner.

"Then what's the problem, Father Bowen?" asked Ellery, wincing as he tried to turn over in bed. He had been laid up for ten days by a painful attack of sciatica.

"The root of the problem, Mr.

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Queen," said Father Bowen, hooking his bony arm under Ellery's and lifting expertly, "is the love of money. See I Timothy, VI, 10. It turns out that Miss Wichingame is — as they say in my parish — loaded. She owns several immensely valuable parcels of property and a considerable amount of cash and bonds. The poor thing has been, of course, a miser. Now, in her spiritual regeneration, she insists on giving it all away."

"To some needy bartender?"

"I almost wish that were it," said the old clergyman with a sigh. "I know at least three whose needs are great. But no — it's to go to her only living heir." And he told Ellery the curious story of the Witch's nephew.

Miss Wichingame had had a twin sister, and while they were identical in every physical respect, their tastes differed profoundly. Miss Wichingame, for example, had early shown a preference for gin and the wilder variety of oat, whereas her twin looked upon spirits as the devil's lubricant and was as moral as a breakfast cereal.

This disparity, unfortunately for Miss Wichingame, extended to their tastes in men. Miss Wichingame fell in love with a small, handsome, dark man — a Spaniard; but her sister, whose eugenic credo was "like to like," gave her heart to "a pure Nordic," as Miss Wichingame told Father Bowen — one Erik Gaard, of Fergus Falls, Minnesota, a large sedate Viking who had gone over to the Anglican church and become a missionary priest. Miss Wichingame's Spaniard left her unwed and with pleasant if not entirely respectable memories; the Reverend Gaard, no trifler, proposed holy matrimony and was triumphantly accepted.

A son was born to the Gaards, and when he was eight years old his parents sailed with him to the Orient. For a short time the missionary's wife corresponded with her sister, but as Miss Wichingame's address became increasingly fluid the letters from the mission in Korea took longer and longer to catch up with her, until finally they stopped altogether.

"I take it," said Ellery, cautiously shifting his left leg, "that when your communicant repented her sins she asked you to locate her sister."

"I instituted inquiries through our missionary branch," nodded Father Bowen, "and discovered that Father Gaard and his wife were murdered many years ago — the Japanese made it very difficult for Christian missionaries in Korea — and their mission burned to the ground. Their son, John, was believed to have escaped to China.

"My parishioner," continued Father Bowen, and he became agitated, "revealed at this point an unexpected firmness of character. She insisted that her nephew was alive and that he must be found and brought to the United States, so that she might embrace him before she died and give him all her money. Perhaps you recall the newspaper publicity, Mr. Queen, especially among the columnists. I

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shall not try your patience with the details of our search — it was expensive and hopeless . . . hopeless, that is, to one of little faith, like myself; for Miss Wichingame's part, I must say she was perfectly confident through it all."

"And Nephew John was found."

"Yes, Mr. Queen. Two of him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He appeared at my rectory in two installments, as it were, each part of him fresh from Korea, and each part of him insisting *he* was John Gaard, son of Erik and Clementine Gaard, and that the other fellow was a cheeky impostor. An embarrassment of blessings. Frankly, I'm up the creek."

"I suppose they look alike?"

"Not the least bit. While both are blond and about 35 — the correct age — there's no resemblance at all, either to each other or to Father and Mrs. Gaard, an old photo of whom exists. But there is no authenticated photograph of John Gaard, so even their dissimilarity doesn't help."

"But I should think," protested Ellery, "visas, passports, ordinary proofs of identity, background —"

"You forget, Mr. Queen," said Father Bowen with a certain steeliness, "that Korea in recent years has not been exactly a garden of tranquillity. The two young men, it appears, had been close friends, both having worked for the same oil company in China. When the Chinese Communists closed in, they fled — quite irregularly — to Korea. The North Korean invasion caught them there, and they got out with a mob of refugees after the Communist armies took Seoul. There was a great deal of official confusion and a relaxation of the normal precautions. Each young man exhibits documents in the name of John Gaard, and each came out through a different airfield."

"How do they explain the identical documents?"

"Each says the other stole his credentials and had them duplicated — except, of course, for the passport photographs. Each says he told the other of an aunt in the United States. No check-up can be made in Korea and, unfortunately, the oil company records in China are not accessible. All our inquiries of the Chinese Communist authorities, made through diplomatic intermediaries, have been ignored. You may take my word for it, Mr. Queen, there's simply no way of checking back on their identities."

Ellery was surprised to find himself sitting up in bed, a position he had been unable to achieve in over a week. "And the Witch?" he exclaimed.

"Bewildered, Mr. Queen. The last time she saw her nephew was when he was seven years old, just before his parents took him to the Far East. He spent an exciting week in New York with her — during which week, by the way, she kept a diary. She still has it —"

"There you are," said Ellery. "All she has to do is question each man about that week. The genuine one surely remembers something of such a great boyhood adventure."

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"She has done so," said Father Bowen sorrowfully. "Each recalls part of it. Each claims with dismaying bitterness that the other can answer such questions because he told him all about it — forgive me if my pronouns are confused. The poor woman has quite worn herself out trying to trip one of them up. She's ready to divide her money between them — and I won't have that!" said the old shepherd sternly.

Ellery asked every question he could think of, and he thought of a great many.

"Well, Father," he said at last, shaking his head, and Father Bowen's lean face fell, "I don't see . . ." And suddenly he stopped shaking his head.

"Yes?" cried the clergyman.

"Or maybe I do! A way to get at the truth . . . yes . . . Where are the two Johns now, Father?"

"At my rectory."

"Could you have them here in, say, an hour?"

"Oh, yes," said Father Bowen grimly. "Oh, yes, indeed!"

One hour later the aged cleric herded two angry-looking young men into Ellery's bedroom and shut the door with a sinister little snick.

"I've had a lot of trouble keeping them from manhandling each other, Mr. Queen. This, gentlemen, is Ellery Queen," said Father Bowen coldly, "and *he'll* soon put an end to this nonsense!"

"I don't care who he is and what he says," growled the first young man. "I'm John Gaard."

"You dug-up *shi*," bellowed the second young man, "you took those words right out of my mouth!"

"Did you ever get your head knocked off by a corpse?"

"Try it, you —"

"Would you two stand side by side, please," said Ellery, "facing that window?"

They grew quiet.

Ellery looked them over sharply. The first young man was blond and tall, with big shoulders, sun-squinted brown eyes, a snub nose, and huge feet and work-battered hands. The second was short and sandy-haired, squintily blue-eyed and curve-nosed, with small feet and clever-looking hands. They were as unlike as two kittens in an alley litter, but two pairs of fists were at the ready, and both glowered, and it was impossible to say which seemed more honestly outraged, the Witch's nephew or his impostor.

"You see?" said Father Bowen despairingly.

"Indeed I do, Father," said Ellery, smiling through his travail, "and I'll be happy to identify John Gaard for you."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *How did Ellery determine which claimant was the real John Gaard?*

The young men glared, as if daring each other to make a break for it.

"It's all right, gentlemen," said Ellery, "there's a very large detective-sergeant named Tom Velie waiting in the next room who could break

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the back of either of you without dropping the ash from his cigaret. How do I know, did you ask, Father Bowen?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Queen," said the clergyman, bewildered. "You haven't asked these young men a single question."

"Would you mind reaching to that shelf, Father," said Ellery with another smile, "and handing me that great, fat, ominous-looking book in the plain paper wrapper? . . . Thank you . . . This volume, gentlemen, is forbiddingly entitled *Forensic Medicine and Legal Biology*, and it was written by two of the foremost authorities in the field, Mendelius and Claggett. Let's see, it should be around page five hundred and something . . . Why, Father, you told me that Miss Wichingame's twin sister was identical with her in every physical respect. Since Miss Wichingame is blue-eyed, then Mrs. Gaard must have been blue-eyed, too. And you described the Reverend Gaard in Miss Wichingame's words as 'a pure Nordic,' which ethnologically puts John Gaard's father among the blue-eyed, too . . . Ah, here it is. Now let me read you the second paragraph on page 563 of this authoritative work.

" '*Two blue-eyed persons*,' " Ellery said, his eyes on the open page of the big book, " '*would produce only children with blue eyes. They would not produce children with brown eyes.*' "

"There he goes!" cried Father Bowen.

"Velie!" roared Ellery. "Catch him!"

And Sergeant Velie, appearing magically, did so in his usual emphatic manner.

While the Sergeant was leading the tall, broad, brown-eyed impostor away, and the short, blue-eyed, authenticated John Gaard was trying to express his thanks to Ellery in an excited mixture of English, Chinese, and Korean, Father Bowen picked up the fat book from Ellery's bed, which Ellery had closed, and he turned to page 563. A look of perplexity wrinkled his leathery face, and he removed the paper jacket and glanced at the cover.

"But Mr. Queen," exclaimed Father Bowen, "this book isn't entitled *Forensic Medicine and Legal Biology*. It's an old edition of *Who's Who*!"

"Is it?" said Ellery guiltily. "I could have sworn —"

"Don't," said Father Bowen in a severe tone. "The fact is Mendelius and Claggett don't exist. You just made up that whole quotation about blue eyes-brown eyes! Isn't it true?"

"There was a time when the books said it was," said Ellery mournfully, "but they probably don't any more — too many blue-eyed parents of irreproachable probity were turning up with brown-eyed children. However, our brown-eyed claimant didn't know that, Father, did he? And now," Ellery said to blue-eyed young John, who was gaping idiotically, "I'll name my fee: Turn me over in this damned — beg pardon, Father — bed!"

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE DANGER WITHIN *by MICHAEL GILBERT* (HARPER, $3.00)	"All characters are intensely real; humor and understatement delightful, writing superior." (AdV)	"The climax is superb, and based on the personal experience of the author." (FC)
CATCH AS CATCH CAN *by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG* (COWARD, MCCANN, $2.75)	". . . absolutely hair-raising. Shattering." (AdV)	". . . heart-stopping suspense . . ." (FC)
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ALWAYS ASK A POLICEMAN *by SELDON TRUSS* (CRIME CLUB, $2.50)	"Rich in enticing characterization and shrewd meshing of villainy, elaborate police work." (DD)	"The story is amusing and lively, the solution surprising and logical." (FC)

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

". . . an unbeatable story crowned with a breathless climax." (DBH)	". . . as suspenseful and lighthearted as an Eric Ambler novel . . ." (HM)	*KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES* AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times* FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press* SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review* DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune* DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News* HM: *Herbert Mitgang in the New York Times* LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle* FP: *Fay Profilet in the Saint Louis Post Dispatch* JS: *James Sandoe in the New York Herald Tribune* AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*
". . . preposterous, perhaps, but a magnificent cliffhanger . . . B plus." (LGO)	"Hop-skip-jump treatment; characters oddish; too much writing. No jolt here." (SC)	
"You may guess the chief secret ahead of time, but the goings on are fun just the same." (LGO)	". . . materials . . . somewhat more exotic than usual . . . but it's a fairly dull business . . ." (JS)	
"The underlying plot is logical enough, but who wants logic from Paul?" (LGO)	". . . a superb host is throwing one of his more convivial parties; you'd better join it." (AB)	
". . . brisk opus . . . setting . . . is striking enough to carry a slim plot . . ." (LGO)	". . . a lively tangle, sorted tidily at the close, and enjoyable all the way." (JS)	
". . . in general is an absorbing small-town newspaper yarn." (LGO)	". . . the sharp prose and narrative movement are Brown at his best." (AB)	
"Fast whirl of excitement largely in standard Hollywood grooves." (DD)	". . . a believable, likable private eye . . . plot elements . . . over-familiar . . ." (AB)	
". . . technique may annoy some readers . . . Logical enough and certainly entertaining." (LGO)	". . . quiet humor . . . attractive people . . . ingenious and well-staged murder . . . a delightful book." (AB)	

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Here is an "unknown" story by the creator of Hamilton Cleek, The Man of the Forty Faces, the Master Detective of Scotland Yard. Unfortunately, Cleek is not in the story. But you will meet some fascinating characters — a mummified Italian, a fat German, a sallow-faced man from Cornwall, and an Alsatian murderer minus a head. This, perhaps we should warn you, is a smoking-car story. It is also, in your Editors' opinion, the best-written tale ever to come from the pen of T. W. Hanshew.

THE MAN WITHOUT A HEAD

by T. W. HANSHEW

I CANNOT CONCEIVE WHAT IMPELLED me to do the thing, for I am not what might be called a "betting man" at any time, and, moreover, the habit of speaking my thoughts aloud is not one of my many failings. But the fact remains that, just as the train pulled away from the dingy little station at Modane, and the fat man in the corner began to nod again, I said quite audibly: "I'll bet a fiver that fellow is asleep before we reach the tunnel, and will snore like a blessed pig the whole way through it!"

I did not address my remarks to any of the persons who shared the compartment with me; for one thing, I did not suppose any of them understood more than a word or two of English at most, and, for another, I was, as I have stated, merely speaking my thoughts aloud. There were four of us in all — a mummified Italian who kept his nose in a book, hour in and hour out; the fat German who had sat blinking like an owl every time I opened my eyes during the night, and had only had two waking intervals since the day broke; and a somewhat sallow-faced individual who looked like a Frenchman, and spent the time jotting things down in a pocket notebook when he wasn't chewing the end of his lead-pencil and staring up at the roof of the carriage in a manner indicative of deep thoughtfulness.

A more engaging set of animated dead men it had never been my misfortune to travel with. We had left Paris — *en route* for Genoa — at 9 o'clock the previous evening; we had tumbled out at Modane the next morning to pass the Customs on the Italian frontier (and, incidentally, to partake of a villainous breakfast at the *buffet*), and during the entire fourteen hours of our enforced association not one solitary word had been spoken by any member of the party until unthinkingly I broke the silence in the manner recorded. It came, therefore, as a somewhat startling

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surprise when the man whom I had long ago decided was a French commercial traveler, making up his accounts *en route*, glanced round at me and said, with as fine an accent as ever came out of Cornwall: "No — I think not. He is pretty good at the game, I will admit; but I fancy he won't go as far as *that*," and forthwith shoved his notebook into his pocket and edged along the seat until he was beside me.

I do not know which surprised me the more — this sudden spirit of sociability upon his part, or the fact of his being an Englishman, and I was just groping round in my mind for words to express my sentiments, when he flung another piece of intelligence at me.

"If you like to bet on losing hazards, that fellow will accommodate you," he said in a carefully lowered tone and with a nod in the direction of the somnolent German. "He understands English."

"How do you know that?" I inquired. "He hasn't spoken a syllable since he came in here last night."

"I am well aware that he hasn't. Thinks he would make it too agreeable for other people if he did. But he understands English well enough to read it, if you will take the trouble to notice that newspaper sticking out of his coat pocket. It's a copy of the Paris edition of the *Herald*."

"But that proves nothing. He may have bought it for a friend."

"Not he. If I know anything, I know the human mule when I see him; and if that fellow hadn't been too far gone when you offered to wager £5 that he would snore the whole way through the tunnel, he would have defeated you on general principles. You can't trust a man with a mouth and chin like his to let you win *anything* if *he* can prevent it. Think he is sleeping because he enjoys that sort of thing? Not a bit of it! His wife, if he has one, or somebody else if he hasn't, told him to take especial note of the scenery of French Savoy, and to get out his watch and count the minutes it actually does take the train to pass through the Mont Cenis tunnel; and he kept awake all last night so that he shouldn't be able to do it. He would have drugged himself if he couldn't manage to sleep any other way, the contrary beggar!"

I glanced over at the sleeping German and laughed. The man's face certainly did suggest those characteristics now that my attention was called to the fact, although I had not noticed it before.

"Are you a family connection of Sherlock Holmes's?" I asked.

"Not the slightest," he replied, with a curious smile that lifted one corner of his mouth halfway up his cheek. "That is one of the few lines I have never tackled as yet. But one never knows what cards one may be called upon to play before the end of the game. *Je ne me doute de rien — et je ne parle jamais de ce que je fais.* I didn't throw that in for the mere purpose of letting you understand

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that I know more languages than my own," he added parenthetically. "I have lived so many years in Paris that the thing has become almost second nature to me; besides — pardon me a moment. We shall be entering the tunnel presently, and I never fail to take a look at this particular bit of landscape."

He rose as he spoke, and stood with his hand upon the strap which controlled the window, and his eyes fixed upon me with a curious sort of intentness.

"Ever been through the Cenis tunnel?" he asked.

"No, never. This is my first experience," I replied. "Is the sensation as uncanny as I have been told?"

"It would require a second Poe to do justice to it. As for me ——" He lifted the strap of the window, and I could see that his hand shook nervously. "I always liken the passage through it to six-and-twenty minutes in hell, and I never fail to fill my eyes and my memory with the picture of green trees and bright sunlight before I am swung into the place. But then, mine was such an awful, such an unearthly experience ——"

A sudden crash cut in upon his words. The window-strap had slipped from his hand, and the sash shot down with a bang that made the sleeping man beside it start up with an excited "*Ach! Lieber Gott!*" and the reading Italian turn for the first time from his book. And, at the same moment, light and air and landscape were licked up and swallowed, a swirl of darkness swooped down and struck our eyes, a sulphurous blast gripped our throats and stank in our nostrils, and the whole world seemed to have plunged back suddenly into a roaring, reeking chaos.

We were in the tunnel.

"*Ich bitte um Entschuldigung; es war sehr albern von mir*," said the Cornishman, looking over his shoulder and addressing the scowling German as the tiny spark of light in the dish-shaped lamp in the ceiling began to make its existence manifest. "I suppose I am a fool," he added, dropping back into English and speaking to me this time, "but I am always more or less nervous and upset when we say 'Goodbye' to the world at large and swing into this hell-hole. It was here — while the train was whizzing along just as it is doing now, and the darkness was so thick you could cut it — that the man without a head got in and sat down opposite me — just as our German friend there is sitting opposite you."

"*Gott im Himmel!*"

I could hear the suppressed exclamation even through the steady, insistent roar of the train, and I instinctively glanced over at the German. He had drawn himself up into the smallest possible space, and sat, a thing all eyes, crouched as far back in the shadow of his corner as his size would permit. I knew the instant our eyes met that he shared my sudden suspicion of the Cornishman's sanity, if he did not, indeed, share the sensation of swiftly alternat-

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ing flashes of heat and cold which were that moment zig-zagging up and down my spinal column.

For half a minute, as we swayed on through the sulphurous blackness, the Cornishman struggled with the window-strap (for the impact had jammed the sash, and it was no easy matter to readjust it), and during that half-minute I think I must have recalled all the stories of encounters with madmen and all the "Hints on Self-Protection in Cases of Emergency" I had ever read, and I fancy that my face must have reflected my thoughts when the man finally got the sash in place and resumed his seat beside me, for the curious smile was again halfway up his cheek.

"I hope you won't get to thinking that I have escaped from an asylum," he said; "although I am free to admit that what I said just now would be considered ample grounds for doing so. Nevertheless ——" His voice sank, and the smile slid down his cheek and vanished — "it was the plain, unvarnished truth, and it happened as I told you — while we were scudding along through this *Inferno*-like darkness, just as the train is doing now."

"But a man without a head!" I ventured to expostulate, reassured by his demeanor. "And to enter a moving train — in a tunnel! The thing is impossible, you know, impossible!"

"So I should have thought, myself, if I had heard another fellow tell it," he replied, with a slight shudder. "But you can't dispute what you have seen for yourself; you can't say a thing is impossible when you have experienced it. Ever since that time I have had a deeper appreciation of those lines in *Hamlet* regarding the mysteries of heaven and earth which are undreamt of in our philosophy."

He paused — as if undecided whether to go on or not — and I saw his gaze travel to the window as he sank back against the cushion and shaded his eyes with a shaking hand.

"I know I am a fool, and that such an experience is never likely to be duplicated," he said after a moment, "but I am always expecting that dead fellow to come back, and I never enter this horrible hole without looking for him."

He was shaking all over now. I reached for my pocket-flask, and pulling off the metal cup, slopped out a good, stiff peg of brandy and handed it to him.

"Here, take a drink of this; it will pull you together," I said. "And I should like to hear — if you care to talk about it."

He drank the brandy at a gulp, and thanked me with a nod as he handed back the cup.

"I don't often speak of it," he replied. "I hate to be set down as a liar or a lunatic; but — well — I *will* tell *you*. It happened two years ago, and I was going then (as I am going now) to Luvinci, a small station just outside of this tunnel on the Italian side, where the train stops only on signal or by arrangement with the guard.

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At that time I was connected with a Franco-Italian firm of jewelers and dealers in precious stones, and as the samples I carried were extremely valuable, I made it a point when traveling by train always to engage an entire compartment and have the guard lock me in securely. I was, therefore, quite alone when the affair of which I am about to tell you occurred — a circumstance which I have always deeply regretted, since it leaves me absolutely without witnesses of any sort to corroborate my statement. I was, moreover, unusually careful on this particular occasion, and kept a loaded revolver lying upon the seat beside me. I did this for two very good reasons. The first was that I was carrying upon my person jewels amounting in value to nearly 300,000 francs (our firm was executing a commission for the Royal house of Italy); and the second because, some four months previously, a fellow commercial traveler, who had the misfortune to resemble me very closely indeed, had been murdered in a compartment of the Lyons express, and his murderer, who was most fortunately captured, confessed before going to the guillotine that he had mistaken the man for me."

He paused as though overcome by some hideous recollection, and passed a shaking hand across his forehead.

"A narrow squeak for you," I said, feeling that I ought to say something.

"Very," he agreed. "And it did not tend to make me feel any the more comfortable to learn, as I did learn from the confession of the murderer — he was an Alsatian, by the way, and his name was Etienne Clochard — that I had long been shadowed by the members of the organized gang to which he had belonged, and that, in his own characteristic phraseology, 'they would have me yet.' On the morning prior to my starting upon the journey of which I am now telling you, this Etienne Clochard had been guillotined in Paris, and there was a full account of the execution in all the evening papers, *La Presse* in particular giving a very graphic description of it. Call it a morbid taste if you like, but that description fascinated while it appalled me. I think I read it a dozen times that night and a dozen more the next morning, and I was reading it again when the train whizzed suddenly into this tunnel, and all the world seemed to be blotted out in darkness and vapor. The lamp in the compartment was even less adequate than this one, and I laid the paper aside, unable to read more. The horrible droning of the wheels — listen! you can hear it now — combined with the gloom and, perhaps, the gruesomeness of the thing I had been reading, got on my nerves and made them raw; the moisture, catching the sulphurous vapor, covered the windows as though they were smeared with milk, and the foggy atmosphere of the compartment made breathing a labor. The rocking train raced on, and, after a time, the green silk 'eyelids' over the ceiling

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lamp, disturbed by the vibration, winked and slid down. I got up and stood with a foot on either seat, trying to adjust them. They would not remain up, however, and I had just determined to take out my pocketknife and cut them away altogether when I heard the door behind me — the locked door! — open and close with a bang. I don't know whether I fell or jumped down from my perch; I only know that I got down somehow, and that, as I faced round, all my nerves pricking and twitching, and my heart hammering against my ribs as though it would beat its way out of me, I saw standing before me the shape of a man — a tall, slim man, with a great scoop cut out of his coat and shirt where the collar should have been, a slim, red line running round his throat, and above that line a gray-white, dead face with shut eyes and hanging lips."

"*Ach! Lieber Gott!*"

I heard the words quaver out from the German's corner, but I could not see his face, for the thick vapor which the opened window had let in floated between us, humid, yellow, reeking of sulphur. I looked round at the Cornishman, every fibre of my being tingling, and something creeping up my neck. He was sitting bolt upright and looking straight before him, his forehead puckered up, and the second joint of his left forefinger held between his teeth.

"Go on," I said faintly. "You are sure it wasn't nerves?"

"As sure as I am that you are sitting here beside me this minute," he replied. "Nerves may often make a man fancy that he sees things, but they can't make those things talk."

"And he *talked*?"

"Yes. As I faced round and saw him, his dead lips said quite distinctly: 'Good evening, comrade. We travel far and fast. It may be morning to you, but it is evening to me — forever!' And then, with a wave of the hand, inviting me to resume my seat, he sat down in the corner near the window and turned his dead face towards me, his eyelids never once lifting, and his head, jarred by the movement of the train, rocking unsteadily upon his shoulders. Once he put up his hand to steady it, and as his fingers touched that red line about his throat, 'The trademark of Monsieur de Paris,' he said, with a ghastly movement of the lips which, in a living man, would have been a smile. 'He guillotined me at dawn this morning.'"

The voice of the Cornishman dropped off suddenly into silence, and once again he took his knuckle between his teeth, his eyes looking straight before him as though he were lost in thought. As for me, I sat waiting for the next word as breathlessly as any schoolboy ever hung over one of Poe's tales, my heart pumping like an engine, and the pores of my skin pricked up into little beads.

The train alone made sound now, for even the German's voice was still. For a time we reeled on through

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the blackness of the tunnel in this state of nervous tension, and then the Cornishman spoke again.

"I do not know whether I fainted or not when the Thing in the corner said that," he went on; "but some sort of suspension of the faculties must have occurred, for there is a period of blankness in my memory from that precise moment until the time when I found myself half-sitting, half-lying upon the seat immediately in front of my awful companion, and my hand groping blindly for the spot where I had placed my revolver. I know that even then I was conscious of the uselessness of such a weapon — of any weapon — against such a visitant as he; but I groped for it all the same, yet groped in vain. In some strange way, by some malign agency, the thing had been spirited away, and I sat there helpless, hopeless, appalled, with that dead creature gibbering at me in the green dusk of the veiled lamp. The train rocked on, his doddering head keeping time to the swaying motion of it, and that awful parody of a smile distorting his loose-lipped mouth. I fought with myself — I tried to reason with myself; I struck my hands together and dug my nails into the flesh in the effort to wake myself from what I felt must surely be nightmare. It could not be, this thing — it simply could not be, I told myself. It was out of all reason — out of all possibility, and yet — there it was before me, and I was not sleeping — not dreaming; neither was the creature in the corner a shade, for it actually cast a shadow on the cushioned back of the seat!"

I admit it — to my everlasting shame I admit it: as the Cornishman made that statement I gave a little gulp, and twitched away from him as from some uncanny thing, and crouched in my corner much as I had seen the German crouch in his. I did not speak. I had reached a point where I simply could not. I merely held my breath and waited.

"I do not know how long it was before the Creature spoke again," the Cornishman went on; "but of a sudden I became aware that its voice was again sounding above the muttered thunder of the train, and that it was crooning to itself rather than talking to me. 'Ah! he is the prince of valets is Monsieur de Paris,' I distinctly heard it say. 'So softly he touches, so softly! It is like the brush of a bird's wing, that sweep of the shears round the shoulders that lays bare the neck and lets the morning air blow on it. It is like the touch of a feather, that snip! snip! behind the ears, and the gentle falling of the cropped hair on the warm, bare shoulders — the thick, matted hair that smells even yet of the pomatum Lanisparre the barber rubbed into it all those days ago. *Ohé!* Monsieur de Paris, I salute you. What a tender dog you are, with your sorrowful eyes and your red gloves — not to shock a man's sensibilities! But you smell of sawdust, *cher ami*, and the hinge of your basket creaks. Softly, softly!

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don't hurry a man when he is taking his last walk. Aha! my friend the tilting-board, you shine like glass; but we shall have a short acquaintance, you and I. *Vivat!* we are off! I see you open your hungry jaws, Monsieur the Lunette; I see you flash in the dawnlight, Madame Three-Corners, and I rush to meet you. It is touch and go; it is click and off. *Vive la France! vive la! vive la!*' "

Again the voice of the Cornishman dropped off into silence. I sat breathless, quivering, waiting for him to speak the next word.

"I do not know," he said presently, "how my reason survived the shock of that moment. I do not know, I do not pretend to imagine, what would have been the end of the horrible experience had I not at that point made a discovery which gave the whole ghastly affair a different complexion, and made me shut my hands hard, and pull myself together for what I now felt would be a fight for life. It was no less a thing than the discovery of the whereabouts of my missing revolver. It was lying on the cushioned seat between the knees of the decapitated man! I sucked in my breath with a sort of gasp as I made that discovery, and a thought only less horrible than the one it had exercised hammered at the back of my brain. If the revolver had been useless to turn against it, why had the Creature been at the pains to deprive me of it? Was it a trick, then? Was my ghastly visitant merely some clever thief who had adopted this appalling disguise, and invented this daring plan, for the purpose of frightening me into complete helplessness before he summoned his confederates to rob and murder me? If *that* was his game ——"

The Cornishman stopped short and left the sentence unfinished. I saw his eye travel to the window, and the curious smile glide up his cheek again. My own gaze followed the direction of his.

Along the vapor-smeared surface of the glass a faint glow of light was creeping — a light which presently burst into the compartment with such a fierce and blinding glare that for an instant I could see nothing.

The Italian laid aside his book for the first time, and lowered the window nearest to him; the Cornishman got up and loosened the strap of the one close to where I sat; and as a current of fresh air swung through the compartment and dispelled the fog, I became conscious that we were out of the tunnel, and that the German was still sitting in his corner with gaping lips and wide open eyes.

The Cornishman rose, lifted his portmanteau out of the rack, looked down at me and — winked.

"I reckon I've won that £5 note hands down," he said, with a laugh. "Our friend from the Fatherland never slept a wink, nor snored a snore, the whole way through."

I looked at him aghast, dimly comprehending, but too far gone to speak, and then mechanically put my hand to my breastpocket, for the

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train was slowing down, and I remembered what he had said with regard to his destination.

"Well, I'm *dashed!*" I managed to gasp at last, and pulled my purse into view.

"No, don't pay it to me," he said hastily. "I've won it, I know, but — send it as a donation to Dr. Barnardo's Home; it will do some good there. I am sure I can trust you to do it; you were so willing to pay up like a man. One last word — don't make rash bets in future. You will always find somebody ready to take you up. Goodbye."

The train had stopped, and the guard was at the door.

"Your station, signore," he said, and reached out his hand for the man's portmanteau.

And then, for the first time, the German spoke.

"*Ach!*" he blurted out, leaning forward as the Cornishman was getting out, and laying a twitching hand upon his sleeve. "You go like dis? Sir, you do not tell if it vas really a teef or de ghost of dot Clochard mans, and I am exploding mit curiosities already. De end of de story, it is vat?"

"What you like to make of it, my good sir," the Cornishman replied. "It began under *my* hat, and there's no earthly reason why it shouldn't end under yours. Goodbye!" He turned and held out his hand to me. "Barnardo's kids will be the gainer, at all events."

"Goodbye," I answered, as I leaned out and wrung the hand he extended. "It was ripping, and you had me nicely. I say, you know, *you* ought to write for the magazines."

He looked up at me and laughed.

"I do!" he said, and walked quietly away.

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We welcome the first appearance in EQMM of Henry Myers — with whose work you are much more familiar than you may think . . . Mr. Myers was born in Chicago, but he has been a New Yorker since the age of one. He attended Public School Number 6, Townsend Harris High School, and then Columbia University, where he studied music. He went to Berlin to continue his musical career, but out of the blue he decided to become a writer. His break from music was gradual — he began by composing words and music for opera. Then, after a hiatus as press agent for Lee and J. J. Shubert, Mr. Myers wrote a play. It became Lorenz Hart's first theatrical venture — "The First Fifty Years."

The rest might be said to be history. Author of nearly 50 plays and musicals (some with Oscar Hammerstein, Otto Harbach, and others), Mr. Myers has also written for television (notably for Studio One) and has an impressive record in Hollywood — his motion picture scripts include that fine Western, "Destry Rides Again." And that isn't all: Mr. Myers has conquered the novel too; his book, THE UTMOST ISLAND, *was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection for October 1951.*

And yet, despite his success in almost all phases of writing, there has been one that, in his own opinion, has baffled him. He never seemed to be able to conquer the short story — at least, he never wrote one that satisfied him. So what did Mr. Myers do? Let it beat him? No, indeed. He joined a class in short-story writing at New York University, and at one of the sessions, Mr. Hollis Alpert, the teacher, read W. Somerset Maugham's "Mr. Know-All," which deals, you will remember, with the appraisal of a string of pearls. This reading led to a class assignment in which the students had to write a short story about a precious stone. "Nothing So Hard As a Diamond" is Henry Myers's homework, and it won a Third Prize in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest.

NOTHING SO HARD AS A DIAMOND

by HENRY MYERS

WHETHER OR NOT I OUGHT TO notify the police, there are three reasons why I am not going to: (1) They may not have authority to prevent a crime, which I am not even sure is going to be committed; (2) If I am wrong, I will feel like a fool; and (3) If I am right, it was

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I who put the prospective criminal up to it.

But I can't just let it happen. I'm supposed to have ethics. I'm a doctor.

Exactly a month ago I finished my internship, took an office of my own on upper West End Avenue, and set up as a fully equipped M.D.; fully equipped, that is, with everything but patients. To supply this lack, I spent a little money on engraved announcements, and mailed them everywhere I thought they might do some good.

The only answer I received, and the last I expected, was from the president of the third largest bank in the city. I had found his name, George Brinsley Belmore, in the printed list of my father's classmates, the year they were graduated from Yale, and sent him an announcement with the others, adding a hand-written notation that I was my father's son. Mr. Belmore was not even a forlorn hope; he was just one more unturned stone, so why not? He might — not too unlikely — have the traditional sentimentality of an alumnus.

He did, and it was peculiarly unpleasant. He was too cordial. He didn't just write; he telephoned. Not via his secretary; in person. Not from his office; from his home. Not for business; for dinner. And not some time; right away.

Some people tell me I'm young and impressionable, and practically pat my head. I don't know. How young is 25? By my reckoning, it's a quarter of a century. However that may be, I didn't like his voice. It was the very voice, as I had always imagined it, of every Babbitt, slapper-on-the-back, hee-hawing, heartiness-purveying, smug, happy-days-are-here-again jackass in the world. I was prepared to lick my share of boots in order to get along, but these particular boots were oversized and stepped too heavily on my sensibilities.

"Drop everything and come on!" he brayed into the telephone. "Your patients will live till you get back. Tell your patients — to have patience! Ha ha ha ha ha! Nobody here but just the wife and me. I've got to see old Mickey the Mule's boy. We called him that 'cause he never kicked about anything. Sarcasm, you know. Ha ha ha. Any time will do. Say ten minutes from now!" With another yell of mirth at his own wit, he hung up.

I visualized him down as an extremely fat man, inclined to apoplexy, and mentally catalogued him as a good prospect. That voice of his, high in pitch, reminded me of a dramatic tenor I had heard sing Siegfried at the Metropolitan. A lot of beef supports those resonant head-tones.

And perhaps because he overdid his warmth, I had the impression that he was really cold, unfeeling, even cruel. Some psychologist — Jung, I think — said that sentimentality is merely brutality disguised. The connection was suggested, I

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remember, by an ancient Assyrian frieze, showing a priest of Baal sacrificing a bullock on an altar. The expression on the stone face, perceived and perpetuated by the sculptor, was one of extreme sentimentality, and was oddly appropriate to its owner's action of cutting the bullock's throat.

Business being business, however, I dismissed my telephonic hunches as unscientific. My own throat was in no danger, whereas my host's might be — of laryngitis, at least — if he kept up that kind of vocal production. While I shaved, I felt I might even like him. When I brushed my newest suit, I was sure of it. His heartiness began to seem sincere. He was a Yale man. New Haven. New England. Traditions of hospitality. That kind of rationalizing comes easily, when you're trying to build up a clientele.

I took a taxi, just in case they should be watching from a window, though why a bank president or his wife should be that eager or that easily impressed, I don't know. But it was well for my own assurance that I did, for they lived in a genuine, honest-to-God, marble mansion, one of those remaining from the days when a million dollars was a lot of money, and whoever had it wanted you to know it.

The inside was a perfect match for the outside. There were Rembrandts and Persian rugs, neither of which I could suppose otherwise than genuine, a butler who undoubtedly was genuine, and a marble staircase, which seemed less intended for getting down from the floor above, than to permit a regal descent into an assemblage. I admit I am not a competent judge of how wealth ought to look, not having acquired any. I may even be envious. But to me it seemed ostentatious.

Down the marble staircase came my host, royally, because the staircase would have it so, although his intention was to be affable. His appearance startled me, not because he differed from what I had expected, but because he didn't. He was fat, he might well be apoplectic, what with a puffy vein standing out from one of his temples and little, mean eyes in the middle of a moon face. I felt as if I had already dreamed him. He was, it is true, a little shorter than I had anticipated, but that somehow made him worse. Anything would have made him worse; nothing could have helped. The only thing even remotely in his favor was the fascination that a huge fortune carries about with it, and my own vague hope that I might get a little of it.

The machine-gun insistence with which he had assaulted me over the phone was absent now. Having got me there, it was presumably not needed, and had been turned off. Instead, he beamed, like a ray of light shining through a glass of jelly. He came toward me, smiled, spoke my first name, which is the same as my father's, and held out his shapeless hand. I smiled, and shook it.

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He maintained his grasp for a moment, looked through me at my father, saw the resemblance, and was satisfied.

"Mrs. Belmore will be down soon," he said. "Come into the library; I want to tell you something before she joins us." He piloted me, with his arm possessively about my shoulders, assuring me on the way that it was like being with old Mickey the Mule again. There's a great kick in it, ha ha ha.

The library was of course magnificent, with chairs and lamps so arranged for comfort and lighting as to make one really want to read, and rows of books exquisitelybound.They were all classics or semi-classics, or at least books which at one time or another had been considered important. He saw me looking at the titles — I'm curious about what people read — and said: "I've been doing some first-edition collecting. Show them to you, if you like, after dinner." I replied that I would enjoy that; but my eye was on a couple of shelves of reading matter that seemed not in keeping with the rest. Detective stories — dozens of them, all in inexpensive paper editions, but, unlike the others, all undeniably fingered and read. I thought I had him: this was what he really liked.

"No," he said, answering my silent question, "Mrs. Belmore reads those. I wish she would take an interest in something good." (The snob!) He motioned me to a chair. We sat. "Here's what I want you to do."

So. He wanted me to do something. I *thought* there was a catch, back of all that cordiality.

"First of all, don't tell Mrs. Belmore you're a doctor."

Immediately, I had a lurid vision of Mrs. Belmore as a dangerous maniac, whose confidence I was to gain. But he at once took the melodrama out of it.

"There's nothing the matter with her," he explained, "except that her stomach was upset this morning. Couldn't eat her breakfast. Day before yesterday, same thing."

"Are you sure she needs a doctor? Maybe a simple laxative —"

"That could be," he conceded, and then with a, for him, strange embarrassment: "You don't think she might be — pregnant?"

This was the first question anyone had ever asked me professionally, and it gave me something of a thrill. It made me pause, too, for I wanted the answer to be right. So I thought for a moment. He must be about 60, the age my father would have been, had he lived. If Mrs. Belmore were, say, twenty years his junior — well, it could be. "Would this be Mrs. Belmore's first child?" I asked.

"Of course," he answered, with something like annoyance. "We've only been married a month."

"Oh. I beg your pardon. May I ask, then, how old is Mrs. Belmore?"

"Nineteen."

That flabbergasted me. Then, in quick succession, it filled me with anger at the outrage against Nature,

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horror at this monster who had perpetrated it, contempt for what must have been a cash transaction; finally sardonic amusement, and even a little pity. I searched for something to say that would not be tactless, and at last came up with: "If she will come to my office, there are certain tests —"

"She won't do it. Positively refuses to let a doctor examine her."

"Why?"

"She gives no reason. She just won't cooperate. That's why I thought you — There might be some clever way you could question her, or symptoms you could detect, or something. She may not take you for a doctor, because you're young. People sometimes do think that way, you know. And of course you and I will consider it a professional visit, and any bill you care to send —"

Well, it was a business offer of a kind, though I could have wished that my first applicant valued my ability, not my youthful appearance. And I am frank to say I also wished that I could seize this chance to earn my first fee, and a fat one at that. But of course I couldn't.

"There is no magical way to tell, merely by looking at her," I replied. "Not for months. If there were, we wouldn't need laboratories. If she won't tell you herself —"

"She won't. You can't imagine how stubborn she is."

"Then you'll just have to wait, until it either happens or doesn't." I tried to be jocular. "What's wrong with waiting? It may be a delightful surprise."

He did not join in my attempted levity. "I understand," he said, very soberly, "that the birth of a child does not always occur in precisely nine months."

"Sometimes it's a little more or a little less. What has that to do with it?"

"If I could only find out exactly —"

"Why?"

His geniality abruptly vanished, and he snapped at me, almost viciously: "Why do you suppose?!" He did not add "— you idiot!" but he might as well have, and I think I would have deserved it. I should have known what he was after, from what I had already seen of him and his. This great collector of every kind of treasure — antiques, *objets d'art*, marble mansions, and banks — wanted to know that his forthcoming possession, his child-to-be — if such it was — would be his and no one else's, as surely as if a bill of sale came with it.

This dawned on me three or four seconds later than it should have, because of the silent fury that followed his outburst. It was deep and frightful. Nothing less than the future of his kingdom and the legitimacy of the heir-apparent could possibly account for it. His face turned red, his temple vein swelled, and I saw that he really was the apoplectic type, probably with his blood pressure already at a dangerous point.

He got control of himself, calmed

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down, and apologized. "I'm under a strain," he said, "and this has been preying on my mind. Tell you what we'll do. I'll ask you for nothing definite, and I'll expect nothing at all, so whatever you find out will be that much to the good. I'll have you over here more than once, and manage to leave you alone with her; then you just put two and two together if you can. In return, I'll get you started. I know lots of people. We'll let it go at that. It's evidently all you can do, and God knows it's all I can do. It's driving me crazy."

I agreed, on those terms, to start my sleuthing that evening, if he would leave Mrs. Belmore and me alone after dinner. The next moment I was glad I had agreed, because she came into the library.

It would be dishonest for me to say she is beautiful. I can say, more accurately, that she will soon be ugly, as a flower grows ever more beautiful until its very excess of splendor somehow repels. I don't mean that she has quite reached the point where the transition to ugliness begins, but — Wait a minute. Let me stop this nonsense and tell the truth. She is the loveliest creature I ever saw, and I am trying to find fault with her only because she isn't mine. Same as everything in that dreadful house.

Her eyes are violet and her hair is black. She is delicate. She is gentle. She is graceful. She is a little timid, too; after all, she has been a woman for only a very few years, and can scarcely yet be used to it. Her figure — I think I'd rather not go on describing her.

He saw the effect she had on me, and it pleased him, just as when I admired his handsome books. He went to her, put his jelly-fish of a hand on her arm, and introduced us. He called me neither "Doctor" nor "Mister," just "Mickey, the son of my old college-pal."

My mouth acknowledged the introduction, but my insides were trying to shout: "How did this happen? How did this terrible thing ever happen?"

In turn, she murmured her pleasure at having me with them, smiled, and offered me her hand. The habits of my century restrained me from kissing it.

Then the perfect, understanding, old-world butler brought in cocktails, just when I needed one. The gin and vermouth carried me down to their own humbler level of exhilaration.

It was evident to me at once that her husband — I hate to call him that, but I suppose that's what he is — is entirely bewitched. Despite his greater age, inevitably vaster experience, and power as a financial figure, he took second place to her; he did this immediately upon her entrance, and without question, as the natural thing to do. After introducing us, he stopped speaking and contented himself with watching her, rapt, as if he had never seen her before, his lips moving in silent imitation of whatever she was saying. He, the lord of the manor and the

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keeper of the seals! You wouldn't have thought it possible that a spider could be caught by a butterfly.

She presently led the way in to dinner, this lovely child who had to be the lady of the house. Her husband fell behind for an instant, so that he might look appealingly at me, unperceived by her. It was as if he said, "Please! Please! You are an expert, and this is the most valuable of all my treasures! Appraise it, and reassure me!" I did not respond to his worm-like supplication. He had no right to be there. Neither God nor magistrate had really joined them, and I would gladly have put them asunder.

The dinner was peculiarly pleasant, with no one there but the three of us, if you count him. As we sat around their museum-piece of a dining-room table, the evening moved smoothly and gracefully, because it all flowed on the gentle stream of music that was her speech. Her voice was not, as one might suppose from looking at her, either warm or contralto, but cool, refreshing, lyric-soprano, almost Arcadian, like a flute-solo by Gluck. And she showed such kindness in its use! Yes, kindness. She knows that her sweet tones contrast with her vivid beauty, and are, as it were, an antidote to it. So whenever she saw me looking at her too long and fixedly, she spoke, relaxed the tension, and put me at ease.

My part in the conversation was drawn from me, literally, by my hostess's intermittent silences. I found myself asking small, leading questions, about herself and her interests, that I might have the pleasure of her responses.

Even the third member of the party began to speak up. I think it was partly due to his enjoyment in seeing his wife make, what must have been, yet one more easy conquest. It verified his own judgment and taste, and so restored his self-confidence. By the time the end of the dinner was reached, he was riding with us, in high spirits, full of the galloping bombast I had first heard from him.

He saw me admiring a great bluish diamond, set in a ring which she wore beside her wedding ring. It was a gorgeous stone, fit to surmount a king's sceptre, and I shouldn't be surprised if once it had. I was about to compliment her on it, during one of those conversational pauses which it had become my role to terminate, but he broke in blatantly and upset the procedure.

"Show Mickey your engagement ring, honey!" he cried. "He's got his eye on it." Turning to me, he added: "Not many like it, outside of collections."

"Oh, please don't bother!" I protested, seeing her removing it from her finger.

"No trouble," she replied, and handed it across the table to me. It almost seemed that she placed no value on it, for she paid no attention to my reactions to it, but unconcernedly began sipping her coffee

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and thinking of Heaven knows what.

The diamond was most extraordinary. One did not have to be an expert to know it, and I said so, with many adjectives, to Belmore's evident gratification. My mind, though, was not entirely on what I was examining. I had seen another diamond, in another ring, on her finger.

It was a very small diamond, this other one — a mere chip, a splinter, scarcely worthy to be called a diamond at all, beside the monster I was inspecting. The ring in which it was set, narrow and inconspicuous as its jewel, had nestled close beside the opulent one, and so had been obscured until its majestic companion was removed. I wondered what it was doing there, the little upstart, between those two rich pledges of troth and consummation.

I returned the engagement ring to its owner. As she replaced it on her finger, I caught another glimpse of that second little diamond with the modest setting, before it was again overshadowed.

Very likely, I should have kept my mouth shut. I couldn't.

"That's an odd little ring," I said. "It looks so lost, between those two." I thought I was saying it amusingly, at least.

Belmore chose to take it that way. "It's a silly little gewgaw," he said, "but Mrs. Belmore likes it, and when a woman likes something, that's that. Have a cigar."

"I do like it," she assented. "My husband thinks it's fun to call it a silly little gewgaw but after all I —"

He broke in, contritely, with, "Now honey!"

But she continued: "It is little, but it is wrong to call it silly. I'm very fond of it."

With the subtlety of a rhinoceros, Belmore abruptly changed the subject. "Why don't we go into the library?" he suggested. "Mickey wants to see our first editions."

"Would you and he mind going on ahead? I'll join you in a moment."

We did. It was obvious she wanted to cry.

"I'm afraid I put my foot in it somehow," I said, as he and I reached the library. "I'm terribly sorry."

"That's all right; you couldn't know. Perhaps I should have told you. It may have something to do with — that other business. Psychological, you know. Don't you think so?"

"I'll know better if you tell me."

It clearly did have something to do with "that other business" — in his opinion, at any rate — and he had a wretched time making himself begin. For fully a minute he scowled in silence, and I could see he was considering the pros and cons of confiding in me. At last he turned on me, almost defiantly, with: "Some of our friends know about it, anyway!" Then he poured it out without a pause, as if fearful that, once he stopped, he could not bring himself to begin again.

"The fact is, she was engaged to be married, but broke it off to marry

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me instead. She was right. She was smart. I admire her for it. What was she giving up? He was just a young kid, with blond hair and a good physique, but that's all. He was broke. Absolutely broke and always will be. It couldn't have worked. Six months of starving together, and they'd have hated each other. I pointed that out to her, and made her see it. And suppose they'd have kids? It would be worse, and I made her see that too. It's to her credit that she faced reality, instead of going on dreaming. Well, she's not ever going to lose by it. All this —" he indicated the house, with a comprehensive sweep — "everything I have will be hers."

He stopped, hoping for my approval as well as, I think, his own. But it was only his last three words that stuck with me — "will be hers." Will be? Only will be? Then hadn't he given her anything, settled anything on her? Was he afraid, perhaps, that if he did — ?

She rejoined us then, pretending she had been giving some instructions to the servants. The butler followed a moment later, with coffee and liqueurs; and a little after that Belmore excused himself, as he had arranged with me that he would, saying he had to put in a phone call to London.

Passing behind her chair on his way out, he did something that I think was despicable. He cast a meaning glance over her head at me, and then at the tray of liqueurs, indicating as clearly as if he had said it that I should try to get her to drink, and thereby perhaps loosen her tongue. Fortunately, she did not see him do it, since he was behind her, though for a moment I was afraid she had noticed the shocked expression that must have been on my face and the involuntary way I looked from the bottles to her. However, she gave no sign, so either she had seen nothing or did not understand, being too guileless herself to believe such perfidy of her husband.

Then I was alone with her, and it made no difference what he had wanted me to do, because I couldn't have done it. Not that it wouldn't have been easy enough to follow his suggestion, for she instantly began to speak about one of the cordials and to tell me, with child-like pleasure, what a nice taste it has.

"My husband keeps it in the house because I like it," she said. "It comes from the Italian part of Switzerland, and it's called *Fior d'Alpi*. That means *Flower of the Alps*. You can see why. There's a sort of little plant growing in it." She held the bottle up for my inspection, and there was, as she said, a plant-like formation in the midst of the fluid, with leaves and stems, all of pure white.

"That's not a plant," I said, trying to impress her with my knowledge. "It's a crystalline structure, produced by the sugar in the alcohol."

"Oh, do you understand chemistry?"

"A little," I replied, hoping I had

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not revealed that I was a doctor. "I took it at college."

She filled my glass and then her own, and we both drank a little. The liqueur had an extremely pleasant taste and induced an equally pleasant glow.

"This could become a vice with me," she said. "If I drink even a second glass, my head feels giddy, in a most agreeable way, and I feel that I haven't a care in the world."

"Then I advise you never to take a second glass," I said, again sounding more like a doctor than I wished, and tried to cover it up by adding: "I mean, that with someone who isn't used to drinking, one drink goes as far as two or three with someone who is."

"You're right," she said, "I mustn't take more than is good for me. But there is no reason why you shouldn't have some more. Oh, please!" she urged, as I started to decline. "My husband will think I haven't been entertaining you properly, and he is *so* attached to his old friends."

I let her fill my glass. After all, a cordial glass is very small. A few moments later she filled it again, but I observed with satisfaction that she took my advice and had no more.

That *Fior d'Alpi* had an enormous kick, although it was slow in delivering it. I don't know precisely when, but I was presently conscious of the very symptoms she had described: that is, my head felt giddy, in a most agreeable way, and I hadn't a care in the world. Everything became rosy and delightful, and I expressed my feelings by beaming and grinning, in what must have been a rather foolish manner, though at the time it seemed appropriate.

She gave no indication that she knew what had happened to me, and I don't know now whether she was aware of it. She was the perfect hostess. Under her guidance the conversation at last came around to something like this:

"You're a doctor, aren't you?" she was asking.

As I recall it, there seemed no reason for me to deny my profession, since she evidently knew it anyway; so I simply answered, "Yes. How did you know?"

"I know my husband, and I took it for granted. I think you'll feel better, not having to go on pretending."

"Thanks. You're very considerate."

"Not at all. And we'll say nothing about what he wants you to find out. You can just tell him you couldn't learn anything."

"Yes, that's what I'll do." It seemed at the time like a wonderful solution.

"That will be so much better." Having disposed of that point, she went on to the next, in a way that in a more worldly person I would call business-like and efficient. "Let me see. I was to show you the first editions. I don't think any of them are about medicine." She was looking through the shelves now, for something that might appeal to me.

"I'm more interested in *those*," I said, indicating the rows of paper-

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bound detective stories on the shelves.

"So am I. I get them as fast as they come out, but I've never found a perfect one."

"Perfect in what way?" I asked, trying to sound profound. "As an escape from reality?"

"Why should I look for that? I believe in facing reality. I mean, not one of these books has presented a perfect murder. The murderer always gets caught."

"Perhaps there is no perfect murder."

"There must be. Some of these stories come very close to it. It may be that they're not allowed to be completely clear about such a thing. But even I could imagine how it could be done. Almost, that is."

"Ah! Almost."

"I lack certain technical knowledge."

"Such as?" I asked, amused by the incongruity of this lovely girl and her bloodthirsty little hobby.

"Knowledge of chemistry, for example. Now, you're a doctor. You know all about that." I nodded sagely, and prepared to consider the next point by drinking a little more of the *Fior d'Alpi*. I don't know how my glass remained as full as it did — whether she was filling it or I was doing so myself. I wish I knew. But even more, I wish I could be sure about what came next, because that is what has kept me from sleeping ever since.

"Tell me," I think I heard her ask, "isn't there such a thing as a poison which would kill someone and then evaporate, so that death would look as if it had happened naturally?"

"If I knew of such a poison, I'd be in the same boat with those authors. I couldn't tell it. And even such a poison could be traced. Records are kept by druggists, you know — of what they sell and to whom."

"Oh, I didn't know that. How clever of you to think of it!"

The combination of alcohol and praise is a powerful drug in itself. And she was looking at me steadily, more steadily than I have ever been looked at, by anyone.

"If I wanted to commit a perfect murder," is what came out of me, "I wouldn't go about it like that."

"How then?"

"I would study my victim. If I found, let us say, that he was inclined to apoplexy, and probably had high blood pressure, I would look into a medical book — not consult a doctor, mind you, because he might remember and tell — and find out what diet relieves the condition, and what aggravates it. Then I would get him to eat the wrong things, and goad him into fits of temper."

"How long would that take?"

"It depends on how regularly you could get him to do what you wanted."

"I see."

My recollections of our tête-à-tête, which are vague enough about here, black out entirely at this point and leave only a gap. The next thing I remember, I was delivering a sort of

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lecture to her, on the subject of apoplexy, and was saying: "A characteristic attack presents the following phenomena. The patient — " I stopped short, in embarrassment, and said, "I must apologize. I'm talking too much."

"Why do you apologize? You have been very entertaining." With that, she put down a pencil which she had been holding, and laid it beside a pad. I realized the meaning of this: she had been writing down everything I said. Charmed by her though I was, this disturbed me, but when I looked closer at the pad, I was greatly surprised.

"You write shorthand!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. Didn't Mr. Belmore tell you? I was his secretary."

"No," I replied, "but he did tell me some things." I pointed to the tiny diamond and its narrow golden band. "That's an engagement ring too, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Did he tell you that I and the boy who gave me this ring were both working for him?"

"No, he didn't."

"Or that he fired him, and would have fired me?"

"Why?"

"To make sure we couldn't afford to marry."

"No, he didn't tell me that either."

Into that lovely, limpid voice of hers crept a note of incredible hardness, startling and unsuspected as the little diamond had been when its existence was revealed. "When Mr. Belmore asked me to marry him," she said, with all the blood gone out of her tones, "he made something clear to me — something I had not understood before. Very likely I should be grateful to him for it, because it is absolutely true. Before two young people get married, and have a family, the first thing they must do — the very first — is to get money."

At that moment Mr. Belmore returned. Waiting until his wife opportunely turned her head away, I managed to signal "No" to him, and soon after thanked both of them for a pleasant evening, and went home.

All of which leaves me in a quandary. If everything I suspect is true — But it can't be. If I am even remembering correctly, if she really gave me too much to drink, in order to — But that can't be, either. Not she.

Above all, can she really mean to — to — Because, if she does, why then I suppose I will have to dissuade her, or warn him — or do something. But can such an exquisite girl be capable of that? Can it actually have been her purpose from the start, and is that why she married him?

As a first step, before I can do anything else, I'll have to make sure. Luckily, there is that arrangement with her husband by which she and I are frequently to be left by ourselves.

Meanwhile, all I know is this: the wearing of an engagement ring signifies an intention to wed.

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HE HAD A LITTLE SHADOW

by CHARLES B. CHILD

THE BOY WAS A WAIF WHO FREquented the great bazaar of Baghdad. He was small for his years, which were perhaps eight, very slim and high-waisted, with delicate hands and feet, a bright elfin face and large, dark eyes. He wore a ragged gown girdled with a piece of rope, his turban was a wisp, he had never owned shoes; his only possession was a basket which he used to carry the purchases of shoppers for a few pennies.

Chafik J. Chafik, an inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department, stood on the steps of the Imperial Bank and idly watched the child who flitted through a patchwork of evening sunlight and shadow with the basket balanced on his head. The boy sang in a thin treble, sometimes skipped and clapped his hands, and the Inspector, troubled by end-of-the-month bills, had a moment of envy. He was turning away when he saw a man lurch from the crowd.

The man wore the tribal dress of a minor chieftain of the Muntafiq. His magnificent build was typical of the marsh Arab, and so was the hair-trigger temper that made him turn on the boy, with whom he had collided, and strike him in the face.

It was a brutal blow and the youngster dropped the basket and clasped his arms over his head, but they made a frail barrier. When the man raised a heavy brassbound stick with intent to continue the senseless beating, Inspector Chafik ran down the steps, wrenched it away, and threw it behind him.

He said mildly, "Temper is as intoxicating as alcohol."

The man turned. He had pale lips, flattened to his teeth, dilated eyes staring with madness. Normally authority was Chafik's protection, and he was suddenly and painfully aware of muscular inadequacy; but he drove his elbow against the man's nose, bringing a bright gush of blood. Then, rising on his toes in an effort to increase his stature, he used his forearms as clubs.

A constable intervened opportunely with a swinging gun. Inspector Chafik said, "Two blows are enough. This head is not a nut, there is no sweetness in it. But I advise handcuffs. We have madness here."

There was blood on his sleeve and he looked at it with disgust, for he was a meticulously neat man. Irritably he took out a pocket mirror, examined his thin face, gently touched a bruise on his swarthy cheek, and straightened his polka-dot tie. Then, recovering his *sidarah* which had fallen in the dirt, he brushed it and adjusted it to the correct angle on his long head. He sighed with annoyance.

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"As an angry cockbird ruffles its feathers, so I have ruffled my clothes," he said to the boy.

The face that turned up to him was white and frightened. Tears welled in the big eyes, but the boy held them back with courage, even with dignity, a quality engaging in a waif who begged his daily subsistence. There were too many fatherless children in Baghdad; lack of organized welfare made boys like this grow up with minds sharpened by animal cunning, and in time most of their names were added to police records. Chafik sighed and took money from his pocket.

"Go fill your belly," he said as he thrust the coins at the boy.

A grubby little hand touched his own, clung to it. "Sahib," the boy said. "You are my father, sahib —"

It was a pleading, not a wheedling, voice. Chafik smiled, but was startled when he saw how worshipfully the boy looked at him. "How are you named?" he asked.

"They call me Faisal."

"That is the name of our young king. Who named you so royally?"

Faisal shook his head. "There was once a woman who called me Faisal. Very long ago when I was small. She died," he added vaguely.

"And now you are a man?"

"A man, sahib. I work. Truly I do not steal much." The big eyes glowed with gratitude and adoration. "That one would have killed me. I saw it in his face. You are my father, sahib. I will go with you."

The Inspector was embarrassed. He had been married many years and was childless, a circumstance which could be adjusted by polygamy under Moslem law. But he was devoted to his wife; although he knew she was distressed by lack of children, he had convinced himself they would have disorganized his well-regulated home.

"Take the money and eat," he said, and turned his back.

The constable had secured the man, and Chafik bent and rolled back an eyelid, then announced, "One sees the reason for madness."

"He has eaten the forbidden fruit, sir," said the officer.

"Yes — hashish —"

The Inspector clasped his slender hands with unexpected emotion. For several months he had been trying to stop a flow of narcotics responsible for a crime wave in Baghdad. In spite of his efforts hashish continued to enter the city and in its wake came violence and death. The attack on the boy was typical.

Chafik said harshly, "Let God pardon me, for I wish death, and not an easy one, for those who peddle this evil."

He shrugged, lighted a cigarette, and looked with loathing at the hashish eater, who struggled against the handcuffs. When a police ambulance arrived the Inspector walked away.

The cigarette had a bitter taste and he dropped it, but could not discard the bitter thoughts. He threaded a path between the benches

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that overflowed from the cafés, turned right at the intersection of Samawal and Al-Rashid Streets, and walked under the shabby arcade to his headquarters. He had the sensation of being followed as he entered the narrow doorway, and turned swiftly.

He saw an elfin face and appealing eyes. "Sahib!" Faisal pleaded. "You are my father, sahib —"

"Away with you!" Chafik said, and losing dignity he ran up the worn steps to his office.

Inspector Chafik was received by his assistant, tall, gaunt, unemotional Sergeant Abdullah, who was sufficiently stirred by sight of his superior's bruised cheek and ruffled clothes to say in a solemn voice, "Sir, I trust the individual who assaulted you is detained."

"In the hospital, my dear Abdullah. But I did not put him there. He is the victim of hashish."

"Sir, we have many hashish victims today. I bring you the reports. Two killings. Five assaults with intent to kill —"

"The menu is unappetizing and unvaried," said Chafik. "There is always a list of crimes over the weekend." The Inspector took a manicure set from a drawer and began to clean his nails. After a moment he said, "My conclusion is no hashish is stored in Baghdad; if it were, it would be distributed more evenly throughout the week. It is smuggled in. But when? And how? I am a policeman, not a seer. What is the source of the drug? Does it come from Syria? From Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Persia? Or is it brought by sea from India?"

The sergeant said gloomily, "So many places, sir."

"And so many routes. There are highways, a railroad, the transdesert autobus, aircraft, and innumerable camel caravans."

"We watch them all. The frontier checks are severe —"

Inspector Chafik interrupted, "Can we guard every mountain path? One man with the legs of a goat can carry enough hashish to poison half Baghdad." He put away the manicure set, breathed on his nails and gave them a final rub with a silk handkerchief. "Our records show crime increases with the waning of the week and in this is a clue. But like a photographic negative the image does not appear until developer is applied. If we had the formula —"

He went to the window and looked over the vast dun-colored city. Here and there the cubist pattern of flat roofs was relieved by the blue dome of a mosque, and in the distance the Tigris made a tawny highway through groves of date palms. It was a noisy city. Harsh sounds always jarred the Inspector, and when a car pulled up with a screech of brakes in the street below, he winced and looked down.

A boy had darted across the street and now squatted on the other side with his feet in the gutter.

"Am I to be haunted?" Chafik asked indignantly.

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"Sir?"

"You have three daughters, Abdullah. Do they follow you about and regard you with admiration?"

"They do, sir."

"You find it embarrassing?"

"Sometimes, sir. But it also gives me a warm feeling here." The sergeant struck his breast.

"Then the emotion is normal," said Chafik. His voice had the hollow sound of one who speaks a thought unintentionally; hearing himself, he flushed, irritated by his incurable habit. "We must find the means of developing the image hidden in our records," he said hastily. "But enough for the day."

He was too preoccupied to see the boy who lurked under the arcade, but when he reached his car parked on the city square, he was roused by a light touch. An eager voice began, "Sahib! My father—"

It pulled the trigger of temper and the Inspector shouted, "Out, Pestilence!" and slammed the door of the car.

He drove over the great steel bridge that spanned the river. His home was on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings, off Mansour Avenue. The yellow brick house, which was small and typically suburban, was cooled by breezes from the Tigris. Chafik latched the street gate, carefully wiped his shoes, and let himself into the softly lighted hall.

His wife, a dark, slim little woman, was there to make him welcome. Her face was freshly powdered and she wore an attractive dress. After fifteen years, Leila knew the wisdom of working at marriage. She was a woman of considerable intelligence and combined a Westernized appearance with a degree of meekness expected of an Eastern wife. She said, anxiously, "You are late, my man."

"It was a question of a formula for extracting from our records what is surely hidden there. You would not understand."

"No," said Leila, "But I understand you are tired."

She maneuvered him into a chair, removed his shoes, and brought his slippers. He sniffed the appetizing odor of the waiting meal, sighed and said, "Yes, I am tired. Also hungry. One cannot eat records."

After eating it was possible to relax. The only sound in the house was the ticking of a clock, and he was grateful for the quiet and closed his eyes.

Leila stood at the window, hidden by the curtains, watching the street. She liked to speculate about those who passed; her interest in the foibles of humanity filled gaps in her day, times of idleness inevitable in a childless household.

Suddenly she said, "The house is watched—"

Chafik sat up. "What?"

"There is a boy outside. He has been there for some time."

Her husband joined her and saw Faisal leaning against the gate. The elfin face was white and pinched in the light of the street lamp. Chafik

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reacted with confusion. He felt compassion, as for a lost and woebegone puppy, then anger came and he went to the door, but changed his mind and came back. "This foolishness must end," he said to Leila, and explained what had happened. "He follows me everywhere," he complained.

"Such a little boy, and he has such charm," Leila said wistfully.

"A waif. He doubtless has lice."

"He has a hungry look —"

"I gave him money for food. That was my mistake."

"Many give him money," Leila said wisely. "His hunger is not only for food. He walked far to be near you. Oh, pitiful! He makes his bed on our doorstep. Could he not sleep in the shed in the garden?"

Chafik heard the tenderness in his wife's voice and felt a twinge of an old pain. "I forbid," he said angrily. "Once you brought a cat into the house and I was inundated with kittens. You are too impulsive."

"Such a little boy —" said Leila, sighing.

Her husband realized she had not heard a word. Irritably he announced, "I am going to bed," and left her still at the window.

He slept heavily, but not well. In the morning, when he went out, the familiar small figure was waiting. He noticed crumbs on the mouth that curved to greet him and had a dark thought for his wife as he brushed past the boy.

During the day he caught glimpses of Faisal and continued to ignore him. When he came home in the evening, the boy appeared so quickly outside the house, Chafik guessed he had stolen a ride on the back of a car, perhaps his own. He felt helpless and his wife gave no comfort; she was suddenly withdrawn.

Estrangement was rare between them. He was aware of the reason, and at any other time would have used tenderness to relieve the futile longing that happened sometimes to Leila, like the aching of a tooth which is really sound. But the problem of the drug smuggling was a leech in his mind and he could think of little else as midweek approached and, with it, the dreaded increase in hashish crimes.

He was tormented because he was certain the answer of when and how the drug entered the country was in his records. These records were amazingly detailed, and included files on all regular travelers to and from Baghdad, and on all known criminals in the city. But to attempt to unearth the answer in his crammed filing cabinets without a key would be as difficult as finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

On Thursday morning, when Chafik found Faisal waiting as usual, he got into his car and recited a few calming verses from the Koran, then reopened the car door. "Come, Pestilence," the Inspector said. He remembered Leila in the window and was embarrassed by his odd impulse toward the boy.

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Faisal began to chatter gaily. The pleasant young voice disturbed thinking, but when the boy said, "Sahib, today I shall make money," Chafik came out of preoccupation and wondered a little irritably what could be done for the persistent child.

"How will you make money?"

"A train comes. There are things to carry. People tired with travel pay well," Faisal added wisely.

"So today you will eat. But what of tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow does not matter if I eat well today, sahib."

"I envy you your philosophy," Chafik said. "Myself, I would be distressed by such ups and downs. The graph of my life follows an even line; if yours were plotted it would soar to a zenith, then plunge to the nadir. And again to the zenith and so on, indefinitely. Such a graph would be untidy, but the pattern would reveal the fluctuations of your belly, the days when —"

His voice died and he forgot the boy. He was fascinated by his hand which had left the wheel to trace a wavy line in the air. "A graph!" he shouted. "The key — the formula —" The car shot ahead through traffic lights and was parked hastily. For the second time in these few days the sedate little Inspector astonished the guard outside headquarters by running up the stairs.

Sergeant Abdullah was waiting with a pile of reports, but Chafik said, "I have no time for routine. I have found the key."

"Sir?"

"The hashish matter," Chafik explained impatiently. "Abdullah, if we could fix the day when the crimes begin to mount, the exact day every week, perhaps the same day, would it not aid our investigation?"

"Indubitably. A fixed day recurring weekly over a period of several months would permit the narrowing down of means of entry. It would be possible to eliminate certain routes of transportation. For example, sir, highways are sometimes closed by sandstorms —"

"Then bring me squared paper."

"Sir?"

"Paper marked with squares. I am going to make a graph. We will plot all crimes committed by hashish addicts during the past three months. Thus the data from our records will emerge visually."

When Abdullah brought the paper, Inspector Chafik prepared the frame of the graph and indicated weeks and days of each week along the bottom line. He explained, "I shall count one vertical square for each incident. You will now read me the daily hashish reports from the files."

The sergeant read in a courtroom voice that reduced crime to its proper level, unglamorous and monstrous. Chafik's pencil moved up and down marking the level of crime for each day. When he reached the end of the week he linked the daily tallies with a red line.

It was tedious work. The sergeant opened the collar of his tunic and

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permitted his ramrod back to ease against the chair. The clock over the Mustansiriyah buildings had struck ten before he closed the last file.

He said with feeling, "Police work is sometimes unexciting."

Chafik showed his assistant the completed graph. It resembled a mountain range.

"Here is a genuine picture of a crime wave," the little Inspector said, smiling. The joke was lost on his sergeant and he demanded brusquely, "What do you observe?"

"Sir, I observe the parabola of crime begins to rise each Thursday. Then there is a variable peak period of about three days, then a decline."

"What does that mean to you?"

"It proves supplies of hashish are released on that day."

"By what means, Abdullah?"

The sergeant ventured sarcasm. "Perhaps the graph shows how."

"It does," Chafik said. "Today is Thursday. What transport arrives from foreign parts this day?"

"Sir, solely the international train from Turkey, the Taurus Express. But it is a semiweekly train. There is another on Sunday."

"Where are your wits?" Chafik asked. "The crimes begin Thursday, their peak declines on Sunday. Therefore this man who smuggles the hashish travels only on Thursdays. Storms interfere with the desert autobus, with aircraft and the camel caravans, but they rarely stop a train. It is the means of entry." He made it a statement of fact.

Sergeant Abdullah was critical. "But we always search the train."

Chafik again gave attention to the graph. "He has a means of tricking us," he said. He put his finger on the red line where it oddly flattened for a two-week period before leaping to a new high. "What happened here?" he asked.

"Apparently no hashish was available, sir. I remember the period. Many people went to hospital sick through lack of the drug."

The Inspector lighted a cigarette, took a few puffs, then stubbed it. He was shaking with excitement, and said, "This graph is clairvoyant. Bring me our lists of Taurus Express passengers for the past three months. Fortunately it is a short train."

These lists were always taken at the border and copies were sent to the Inspector's office. They checked the names of regular passengers against the police records, but their work was unrewarded.

Abdullah said, "Your thought was admirable, sir, but —"

"I object to 'but.' It is a sly conjunctive that conceals a dagger. You do not think my thought admirable." Chafik shrugged. "We have eliminated the passengers, but there are others. The Taurus Express is an international train. True, the engine, its crew and the conductors are changed at the frontier, but the day coaches continue to Baghdad. Also one sleeping car and a diner. Read me the names of the staff attendants."

Six men made the midweek run

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from Istanbul to Baghdad, all were regulars. There was a *chef de train*, a sleeping-car attendant, two cooks, and two waiters.

While his assistant read the names, the Inspector followed the dates on the graph. Suddenly he looked up. "That was a new name," he said.

"Yes, sir. It would appear that Najar Helmy, a waiter, was replaced for the week in question."

"Does Helmy ride the train the following week?"

"No, sir, but he is back the third week —"

There was a dry snapping sound. Sergeant Abdullah looked at the Inspector, who was huddled over the desk. A broken pencil fell from Chafik's hand and he said in a choked voice, "By God and by God!"

"Sir?"

"Have you forogtten the two-week period when the graph flattens, when no hashish came to Baghdad? Najar Helmy's absence coincides. But is it coincidence that all other Thursdays when Helmy worked the run the telltale line of my graph mounts?"

The sergeant was inarticulate. When he found voice he exclaimed, "Without leaving your office! Sir, without leaving your office you have solved it, even to the name. Let us go seize this Helmy —"

"He who seizes a scorpion in haste repents with haste." Chafik looked at the clock, saw it was nearly train time, and said briskly, "But I confess I am curious to meet this man."

They went to the Baghdad North Station and waited in the office of the railroad police, which commanded a view of the platform. The train had arrived and the scene was bedlam. Kurdish porters, clad in rags, cursed and fought over the baggage. A merciless sun beat on the iron roof and dust blew across the platform.

Chafik pressed his face to the window, but drew back when a familiar pair of eager eyes met his own. He had forgotten Faisal. The boy's presence was natural, for he had said he would make money from the arrival of the train, but the Inspector was annoyed and ignored Faisal's salute.

He waited patiently as the passengers streamed through the exit gate. A detective of the railroad police was at his side and presently said. "There is Helmy. He stands on the steps of the restaurant car, sir."

Najar Helmy was a Turk, short, stocky, and olive-skinned. He stood bowing to a belated passenger, the picture of the perfect attendant who earns his tips.

"You know him?" Chafik asked the detective.

"We are acquainted, sir. He always stays overnight at the Parliament Hotel on Hassan Pasha Street."

The station became quiet, a field after battle, littered with cigarette stubs and torn paper. The attendants bustled in and out of the diner and sleeping car, putting everything in order for the next day. The attendant of the sleeper dragged a hamper of dirty linen to a locker room, and then

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Helmy appeared with a garbage can.

The Turk held one handle; the other was clutched by Faisal, who used both hands as he strained under the weight of the can.

Chafik said in a worried voice, "The boy is at ease with this man. He knows him."

Helmy and Faisal disappeared into the yard at the back of the station. When they returned, Helmy the Turk gave the boy money and dismissed him. Soon, the Turk again left the train, submitted a suitcase for inspection and went up the platform toward the yard and the employees' exit.

Sergeant Abdullah said, "This time he is without hashish."

Chafik was puzzled. "But why should he change his routine?"

"Perhaps he was forewarned, sir."

The Inspector exclaimed and abruptly left the office. Faisal was squatting on the platform, and Chafik took his arm and pulled him roughly to his feet.

"The man who gave you money," he said harshly. "You know him?"

"Sahib, my arm," the boy said plaintively, trying to break free. "I did nothing wrong, only helped carry rubbish, as I often do. The man gave me twenty *fils*. A lot of money —"

"What did you say to him? What did you tell him?"

"Nothing, sahib! Nothing — you hurt —" Faisal squirmed away, looked up reproachfully, and then fled.

The Inspector's anger cooled but his face remained grim. He said to Abdullah, "We have been tricked. I think I know how he took out the hashish." He ran up the platform to the station yard.

A garbage can stood upside down behind a stack of rusting oil drums. Flies swarmed over the scattered rubbish.

Abdullah began, "Sir —"

Chafik said, "Our heads are of the same density. Who would think of searching that filth? When Helmy went out a few minutes ago, he merely upturned the can and took what was concealed there. That is his regular method — and the boy helped him carry the can —"

"If Helmy went directly to his hotel he has the supply with him, sir. We can take him."

"Not yet. I wish to learn how he distributes the hashish."

The Inspector called headquarters, ordered a check, and soon learned Helmy was at his usual hotel. Arrangements were made for a man to register there, for others to be placed strategically throughout the quarter where the hotel was located. Chafik installed himself in a nearby café, ordered coffee and his favorite honey cakes, and waited. But the coffee grew cold and the cakes were untouched; even honey could not sweeten his thoughts.

"A policeman should not have emotions," he announced.

Sergeant Abdullah began, "Sir, you think this boy —"

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"It does not matter what I think," answered Chafik discouragingly. He looked up and down the street and was silent for some time. Then he said, "There he is!"

"The Turk? I do not observe —"

"The boy." Chafik darted across the street to an alleyway.

Soon he returned and said harshly to Abdullah, "He escaped me. But how long has he been spying? Has he gone to report to the Turk? Call our man at the hotel."

The sergeant came back to say Faisal had not been seen. "But he is small, he has the ways of a mouse," he added.

"Or the ways of a rat," Chafik said bitterly.

Shortly after sunset the signal came that the man was leaving, and presently they saw him, strolling in the cool of the evening.

Chafik said, "Keep away from me, Abdullah. You are too obvious in uniform." He got up and followed Helmy to another café.

The place was crowded and the Inspector sat beside a portly sheik, using the man's bulk to screen his slight figure. Helmy was alone at a table, reading a newspaper.

Presently a man came in and greeted the Turk effusively. Helmy offered a cigarette and after a few puffs his companion made a gesture of pleasure. The Turk smiled expansively and took a box from his pocket and passed it across the table; his pantomime seemed to say, "You like my cigarettes? Then take this as a gift." At that moment the bulky sheiks engaged Chafik in conversation and when the Inspector looked again Helmy was alone.

During the next hour the incident was repeated, another stranger received, as a close friend, a gift made of two boxes. Watching without interruption this time, Chafik saw something pass in return for the cigarettes. When the second man had gone the Turk also left the café.

He went to a cabaret in the Bab-el-Sheik district. Once again Chafik saw the play of a stranger, a cigarette, and a gift. When the stranger left, the Inspector signaled an assistant to watch Helmy and then joined Sergeant Abdullah outside.

The stranger was still in view and Chafik said briefly, "He has a box of cigarettes I wish to examine."

Abdullah glided into the shadows. Chafik followed slowly; he heard nothing, but when the sergeant reappeared he had the box. Unemotionally he said, "Sir, I took the precaution of silencing him. His skull was thin and the wall hard."

"That may not be a misfortune," Chafik said.

The small oblong box was inscribed with the name of a famous brand of Turkish cigarettes, but inside the sealed foil was a block of brownish-green resinous substance. It had a faint and peculiar odor and Chafik looked at it with loathing. "This is where the graph led us," he said.

"Hashish, sir?"

"The essence of the crude bhang."

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His thin shoulders expressed what he thought. "Helmy is a very clever man," he went on. "He is the wholesaler. Agents meet him at the various cafés. They buy the hashish cash down, as I observed, then distribute it to their own customers. Helmy takes the lion's profit and avoids the danger of dealing directly with addicts. He has a virtue rare among criminals — he works alone and does not let his business become too big."

They returned to the cabaret. Outside was the man Chafik had left to watch the Turk. He said in a worried voice, "Sir, I have lost him."

"What!"

"A man came shortly after you left. He spoke to Helmy and they both went to the cloakroom. When they did not return I investigated and found an open window . . ."

Chafik's face darkened. "Did a boy speak to Helmy or to this other man?"

"I did not notice, sir."

The Inspector put aside suspicion for the moment. "This man was obviously a bodyguard," he said. "When he saw me follow the agent, he warned Helmy. It is a pity, but not too important. We now know how hashish enters Baghdad and this beast who battens on human weakness is trapped within our city. His arrest is certain."

He called headquarters and ordered a general alarm, then went with Abdullah to Helmy's hotel. The man had not returned. They searched the room and found many boxes of hashish. Chafik said, "He takes only a few with him when he goes to meet the agents. Such a cautious man."

They left men to watch and returned to headquarters. The general alarm was in operation; every officer in Baghdad was alerted, mounted patrols had sectioned off the city, motorized squads stopped all cars on the highways. In the middle of this web Chafik sat at his desk.

But he had troublesome thoughts. Once he announced, "It could be coincidence Faisal carried the garbage, but why was he hidden near the café?" Later he said, "I dealt roughly with him; he may have been afraid to show himself. I am naturally suspicious when followed." This time he pounded the desk with vexation.

"My habit becomes intolerable," he told Abdullah. "I shall go home and rest. Helmy has a good hide-out." As he left he said in the familiar hollow voice, "Must I tell Leila about the boy? What can I tell her that will not give pain?"

He walked to his car parked on the landscaped square near a clump of rhododendron. He had a feeling of letdown and was not his usual alert self.

As Chafik opened the door of the car, a man rose from the bushes and struck a shrewd blow with a blackjack. Then he bundled the inert Inspector into the front seat, got in, and drove away.

Two policemen coming up Al-Rashid Street saluted as the familiar car passed.

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Chafik was in a room, lying on the floor. The first thing he saw was a vaulted ceiling decorated with arabesques in gilt paint. He announced, "Turkish influence. This is an old house." He tried to sit up, but pain stabbed his head and he closed his eyes again.

The next time he opened them he saw a man astride a chair, arms folded on the back. The man said, "A very old house and a convenient neighborhood. Your police will search for days."

Chafik blinked against pain. His head was clearing and he stared at the man, thinking: This is what I hunted. An ordinary man, one who might have been my neighbor. Aloud he said, "Nevertheless, you cannot hide here indefinitely. Arrest is inevitable."

Another man came within vision, a squat barrel-chested man who was doubtlessly the bodyguard. The man held a leather blackjack.

Helmy said, "Restrain yourself, Ali." And to Chafik he said, almost with apology, "He is like a mastiff."

"I, too, have a faithful henchman." Chafik thought of Sergeant Abdullah, the comfort of those broad shoulders and accurate gun; then he had another thought that was not comforting, and asked, "Is the boy also faithful to you?"

Helmy was puzzled. "What boy?"

"The one who helped with the garbage."

"I always use a brat to help me, it disarms suspicion. But I don't use any particular boy," he said.

Chafik smiled in relief. "My mind is clear of an unjust suspicion," he said.

Helmy pulled the chair close to the Inspector. At near view the Turk's mouth and eyes warned Chafik that this was not a neighbor who lived within society, and the laws protecting it. Here was one who coldly calculated chances, made crime a business. Such a man would know no pity.

"I have a proposition," Helmy said conversationally. "You will write a note to cancel my arrest. I will leave on the train tomorrow."

"A simple proposition, I agree. But not practical. Such an order would be questioned by my superiors."

"You will say in the note you use me as bait to catch others."

Inspector Chafik thought: He is clever. There is a chance such a request might be approved. But he said, "It is known you work alone. Furthermore, I am not in the mood to write such a note."

Ali struck him with the blackjack. Helmy kicked him, then pulled him to his feet. They had him between them, knocking him from side to side; when he fell down they lifted him again and beat him again. He heard screams, recognized his own voice, thought: How demeaning that I should evidence pain!

"Well?" Helmy asked.

The Inspector tasted blood, screwed up his face in disgust and said, "This

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does not help. Your arrest is inevitable."

They did it over again. All Chafik said was, "My work is finished and I am now expendable." He began to recite from the Koran in a high voice which gradually became unclear, then incoherent. Unconsciousness released him from the agony of waiting for the next treatment.

He did not hear the sound of feet on the stairs, but he revived with the crash of the door. He heard Helmy's oath and the violence of gunfire and somebody familiar who shouted, "Dogs! Devils!" The guns talked once again; then there was silence and the Inspector dared raise his head.

Near him was the body of the Turk. The other man crouched against the wall, coughing blood. The room was filled with police, among them Sergeant Abdullah.

Chafik said, "Did I rub a magic lamp?" He laughed hysterically, but managed to check himself when Abdullah raised him.

"Praise to the Merciful One!" exclaimed the sergeant. "If it had not been for the boy —"

"The boy?"

"Sir, I refer to the waif. He was in the back of your car, apparently waiting for you, hidden on the floor. He saw you struck. With commendable restraint he remained silent while you were driven to this place. Then he ran back, found me at headquarters, and so —"

"Faisal!"

"That is his name, sir. I detained him in your office."

Chafik said humbly, "God works in strange ways." Then he added urgently, "Let us go there quickly." Moving, he was reminded of pain and was glad to lean on Abdullah.

In his office he stood and looked at Faisal. The boy was asleep in a chair, cheek on his arm, his face smeared with recent tears. In sleep his little hands were clenched into fists and he stirred restlessly and once murmured, "My father . . ."

The Inspector said, "May I be forgiven!" Then he quoted in excellent English, "I have a little shadow, he goes in and out with me —" After a pause he added, "But the use of him I *do* see."

He went to the telephone and was again reminded of a dozen pains. He dialed the number and, waiting for his wife to answer, his eyes were tender, but hearing her voice he said casually, "I will be with you soon, Leila. I fear I am a little bruised and have ruined good clothes, but it is not important. And I have to announce a decision." He drew himself up and said very firmly, "I have decided to make an adoption."

There was no answer. He rattled the telephone and shouted, "Leila! You hear me? I am adopting a boy."

The voice of his wife came mildly. "I hear you, my man. All Baghdad hears you. Please come very quickly. I have had Faisal's room waiting for him these three days, now."

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A WINNER IN EQMM's PRIZE CONTEST

May we make two comments by way of introducing Evelyn E. Smith's prize-winning story — one about the author and the other about her story . . . About Miss Smith, we would simply like to quote from her letter to your Editors: "I had been planning a longer and more orthodox story for submission to the EQMM contest, but, as the deadline grew closer and I found myself afflicted by an influx of European visitors, I realized that I would never be able to make it, so I wrote 'Really It Was Quite Simple' instead. I've always thought the locked-room setup was such a lot of trouble to go to just to kill someone." . . . And about Miss Smith's story, we would simply like to quote one reader's reaction: "If the Editors don't buy this story, I'll just go out and commit suicide!"

REALLY IT WAS QUITE SIMPLE

by EVELYN E. SMITH

"I MUST CONFESS I'M UTTERLY BAFFLED," young Biestleigh murmured in slack-jawed admiration as Colonel Whikehart riffled the deck of cards and, for the tenth successive time, pulled out the one previously specified. "I haven't the foggiest notion how you do it."

A massive gust of laughter turned Sir Odo's equally massive body to a quivering jelly. "Hand quicker than the eye, eh, Whikehart?" he inquired.

"Just a question of knack," the Colonel agreed with modesty. "Picked it up in India."

"Cards are meant to be played with, not *with*, if you see what I mean," said Pottridge impatiently. "How about a spot of bridge, chaps?"

The other three smiled vaguely.

"Looks fairly simple to me," Sir Odo commented, inspecting the Colonel's maneuvers with the cards through his eyeglass. "— Not that I mean to be disparagin', old boy. . . ."

"Quite," agreed the Colonel. "It *is* fairly simple."

"I daresay," Sir Odo continued, "it's the sort of thing you might even manage to teach the young fella here. Make him popular with the ladies."

Young Biestleigh flushed to the roots of his fair hair. "I'm afraid not, sir," he protested. "About the cards, that is. I'm fearfully bad at complicated things. Why, when I read a thriller, I never understand precisely how the murderer did it, even when it's carefully explained in pages and pages at the end."

"Well, you're not a readin' man,

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Biestleigh," Sir Odo explained kindly.

"Take those locked room jobs," the youth went on, warmed by interest in his subject almost to the point of articulacy. "Never can understand how they're done — even when it turns out the fella locked the door from inside with a bit of string and stabbed himself with an icicle. How did he do it, actually, and *why*, I want to know?"

"Now you're getting into psychology," Sir Odo reproved. "Deep stuff; take hours to explain to you. Anyhow, those locked room affairs are utterly preposterous." He wrung scotch out of his mustache with a practised gesture. "Wouldn't work in reality."

"Oh, I don't know," said the Colonel, absently letting the cards slide through his supple fingers. "I'll lay you a fiver that I can shut myself up in a room with young Biestleigh here; and, at the end of ten minutes, you can come, find all the doors and windows — except the one you come in by, of course — locked, young Biestleigh dead, and no sign of me."

"Done!" said Sir Odo promptly. He and the Colonel shook hands.

"I say there," protested Biestleigh. "The fact is, you're going a bit too fast there; I'm not in this thing with you chaps, you know."

"Come now, lad" — Sir Odo clapped him on the shoulder "— surely you don't think old Whikehart has any chance of escaping from a locked room? Think of how silly he'll look when we break in and find him still footling about your body."

"No," young Biestleigh said with a firmness uncommon in him, "I really must decline. My mother — you know — she wouldn't like it."

"Elfreda always was such a stuffy girl," Sir Odo pouted. "Daresay we'll have to try it with an orphan sometime. You an orphan, Pottridge?"

"No, I am not," replied Pottridge curtly. "And now that this damn silly nonsense is off, how about that game of bridge?"

"I have it!" Sir Odo's globular countenance became transfigured with joy. "We don't need to have a dead body at all! I mean to say, you could simply disappear from the locked room without killing anyone first, couldn't you, Whikehart?"

"Much less dramatic," the Colonel said, "but I expect I could."

"Lot of tosh," Pottridge commented.

"Did you say a fiver or a tenner?" Sir Odo went on anxiously.

"A tenner, if you like," the Colonel smiled.

"Makes things more interesting," Sir Odo said with satisfaction. "Mind you, Whikehart, when we break in there must be no sign of you at all, or you lose the bet!"

A shadow disturbed the ascetic calm of the Colonel's face. "No need to break in; you can lock the door from the outside and unlock it after the stipulated length of time. The landlord might get a bit sticky if you damage the door."

"Which room shall we use? Up to you, old boy," Sir Odo proposed.

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"My study," the Colonel said. "It's got only one door and one window — makes things simpler. Besides it opens directly off this room, so you can keep an eye on the door and the whiskey simultaneously."

"Ten to one he has some sort of mechanical contraption there," Sir Odo whispered to young Biestleigh, rubbing his plump palms in anticipation. "But we shall find it, never fear."

"*Wel!*" young Biestleigh shrilled. "I hope you don't think I'm in on this bet! Because I believe he can do it, you know. He can do anything."

"Oh, come now," the Colonel said, tugging his still-black mustache in evident embarrassment. "Not *anything*."

"Let's go to it, shall we?" Sir Odo suggested, too eager to spare even contempt for the craven Biestleigh. "What's your proposal, Whikehart? Do we lock you in your study and then unlock the door after five minutes to find you have disappeared, so to speak?"

"Quite correct," the Colonel nodded, his Mona Lisa smile widening fractionally. "But shall we make it fifteen minutes? I'm just a bit rusty, you know."

"*You're* rusty," said Sir Odo waggishly, "or *it's* rusty?" He followed the tall, thin figure of his host into a small, square room with walls distempered a dingy cream. There were several pieces of massive brown leather furniture, a few books, a number of sporting prints and guns on the walls, and innumerable tables and whatnots bearing immense quantities of brass, carved wood, ivory, and fragments of dead animals — all relics of the Colonel's adventurous youth. A faded Oriental rug with threadbare spots *passim* covered the floor; the one rather narrow window — facing the door by which they'd entered — was curtained in dun monk's-cloth. It was every inch a man's room.

There was, as the Colonel pointed out, only the one door and one window — no other possible entrances or exits, not even a cupboard.

Sir Odo parted the curtains and looked out of window. "A straight three-story drop," he said. "Hardly worth a tenner, eh, Whikehart?"

The Colonel smiled. "I wouldn't jump for less than £50," he agreed. "And even then, what with taxes the way they are, it would scarcely pay."

"Satisfied, chaps?" Sir Odo called back to young Biestleigh and Pottridge, who hovered in the doorway, respectively apprehensive and disinterested. "Right!" He clapped the Colonel's shoulder. "I'll just lock this window from the inside, old boy, in case you happen to have a parachute concealed on your person." His white mustache quivered with appreciation of his own wit. "Now we'll nip out and lock the door. We wait for fifteen minutes; then unlock it, and you should be gone."

"Right you are."

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"We'll be watching the outside of the door," Sir Odo warned, "so there's no use trying any tricks with keys."

"Oh, quite," the Colonel agreed. "I wouldn't dream of it."

". . . I don't like this at all!" young Biestleigh blurted, as soon as the three men were alone and the door between them and the Colonel was solidly locked by Sir Odo's loving hands. "This sort of thing gives me the creeps. If it happened in a thriller, d'you know what we'd find when we unlocked the door?"

"No," Sir Odo replied, his eyes vainly summoning Pottridge to share the amusement. "What would we find, my boy?"

"We'd find the Colonel dead, that's what!"

"And who would have killed him?" Sir Odo asked, restraining laughter with pretended difficulty. "Or, should I say *what*?"

"Well, there you'd have the puzzle, you see," the young man said earnestly.

"Now, books are all very well, Biestleigh — I read 'em sometimes myself — but let's get down to brass tacks. How could anyone or anything get in there to kill the Colonel?"

"Could have been poisoned first," Pottridge suddenly contributed, staring with disfavor into his glass. "Taste of this whiskey would drown out anything."

"Mustn't criticize a man's liquor, old fellow," Sir Odo said with hauteur. "The man's definitely an outsider," he whispered to the unhappy Biestleigh in a voice loud enough for Pottridge to hear.

It was a long fifteen minutes. The level in the decanter had shrunk appreciably when Sir Odo pronounced it time to open the door. Even Pottridge arose from his game of Patience to peer over the baronet's left shoulder, the space behind the right having already been pre-empted by young Biestleigh.

One could not say the study was empty — there was far too much furniture for that — but it was certainly empty of Colonel Whikehart, alive or dead.

"Amazing," murmured Sir Odo, picking the cushion out of a wing chair and shaking it. Some stuffing emerged, but not the Colonel. "Amazing! But the explanation is probably a very simple one if we only knew it."

"Probably," Pottridge agreed. "Most explanations are — afterward."

"Perhaps . . ." young Biestleigh began, and stopped.

"Go on, my boy," Sir Odo encouraged him. " 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings . . .' "

". . . A priest's hole . . .?" Biestleigh suggested, hopefully.

"I'm afraid architects saw little need for priests' holes in blocks of flats built after 1930," Sir Odo remarked, in tones that would have etched glass. "What *are* you doing, Pottridge?"

For that gentleman, languidly entering into the spirit of the thing,

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was thumping the wall. "Secret panel — hidden room," he explained. "The boy may have something. Needn't be for priests; might be . . . opium smugglers or something of the kind."

He thumped more vigorously on the wall. A knocking from the other side responded with equal vigor.

All three jumped. "What was that?" Biestleigh quavered.

"Neighbors, I daresay," Sir Hugh replied tartly. "You generally do have 'em on the other side of the walls in flats — a great drawback, in my opinion. However, I don't expect they like that infernal din you're making. How could you find a secret panel in a painted wall, man?"

"I dunno," Pottridge replied, unabashed. "By looking, I suppose."

". . . Well," Sir Odo concluded, his mustaches aquiver with disappointment, "I must admit that Whikehart has won his bet. And jolly clever of him too," he added.

"Decent of you to say so, old boy," the Colonel said, coming in from the next room.

"Whikehart!" Sir Odo exclaimed. "Good to see you, old man! Excellent trick that. However did you do it?"

"Really it was quite simple, I assure you," the Colonel smiled. "I'll explain it, but let's all have a drink first." He led the way back into the sitting room, where they all helped themselves to refreshment.

"See, I told you," Sir Odo pointed out to young Biestleigh. "Sometimes it's these simple jobs that are the brainiest to work out. Tell us, old fella, how did you do it?" he asked.

"Well, you see, I didn't actually leave the room until you chaps came in. Then, when you unlocked the door, I just walked out."

"That was jolly good —" Sir Odo stopped. "But how is it we didn't see you?"

"Oh, that took a little more doing. I made myself invisible first, of course; trick I learned from a Yogi fella out in the Punjab — absurdly easy once you get the hang of it."

Sir Odo laughed uproariously. "And that was all you did? And here I've been looking for some devilishly ingenious and complicated scheme. See —" he addressed young Biestleigh "I told you it would turn out to be something childishly simple, didn't I? Why is your mouth hanging open like that, boy? Damned unprepossessing."

"Why I — I never could figure out these locked-room things, I expect —" the young man faltered uneasily. "You chaps are just too brainy."

"Bridge is excellent for sharpening the wits," Pottridge suggested. "How about a game?"

"Well, why not," the Colonel said affably. "I can afford it tonight."

"Write you a check," Sir Odo said quickly. "Only, you won't cash it for a day or two yet, will you, old chap? Fact is . . . few matters with my bank . . . straightening out."

"Of course, of course," the Colonel replied, handing him a pen. "I quite understand."

"I don't," said young Biestleigh.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Best "First Story" in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest

Last year's contest produced the largest number of publishable "first stories" in the history of EQMM's annual criminological clambakes. No less than thirteen "first stories" made the grade — no, we are not superstitious; in this respect, thirteen is a very lucky number! But seriously, the finding of thirteen new talents in a single year is breath-taking news. It augurs well for the future of the detective-crime short story. There is new blood in the field — good, rich, red blood — and, hallelujah, the young men and women are a-comin'!

It was not easy to select the best "first story" from among the thirteen winners. But finally we decided that the honor — and the check for $500 — should go to E. C. Witham for his story, "The Silver Spurs." This story is remarkably well written for a first-published tale; its characters are firm and clear and three-dimensional; and its plot builds up a tension that you will feel not only in your mind but in the physical nerves of your body. We'll all be hearing more of Mr. Witham . . .

Before we tell you a few details about the author — our usual informal introduction of new writers — we would like to call your attention to the fact that EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest is now officially on; and again we are offering a special award of $500 to the best "first story" submitted between now and October 20, 1953. So, if you have had the urge in the past to try your hand at a detective or crime or mystery short story — even as short as 1500 words — why, obey that impulse. If your story is good enough, it may win one of the regular prizes, including the $2000 First Prize, or it may win the special $500 prize, or it may be purchased at our regular space rates for "first stories." In any event, its publication will bring you honor as well as cash, and we promise it will appear in the very best company in the world.

Now, back to Mr. Witham: He worked his way through junior and senior high school by peddling baked goods; did sports for his high-school paper; was permitted to hang around the office of the local newspaper in his spare time, "snuffling up crumbs and ghosting parts of the sports editor's column." All this, you understand, out of the goodness of his soul — no pay. Eventually, Mr. Witham became assistant sports editor on a much

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bigger newspaper halfway across the country — thus is virtue rewarded.

So, we see, Mr. Witham is (in his own words) "a victim of virulent inkitis."

At odd times he has also been a salesman, combat infantryman in the Pacific, trouble-shooter for a politician, personnel consultant, private detective, and special agent for counter-intelligence in Europe.

His ambition? "Plenty of it and all in one direction: success as a writer — and a cabin near some beach . . ."

Mr. Witham has the three essentials: the background, the will, and the talent . . .

THE SILVER SPURS

by E. C. WITHAM

"I CAN TELL YOU NOW," SAID MISS Harriwell sourly. "Mr. Holden won't sign anything today! He's been playing around the island all day!"

It may as well be understood that I don't like Miss Harriwell, nor do I like any of the Harriwells the world over. This particular member of the sorority joined our service nineteen years ago in pursuit of romantic travel and a husband. Now she plays the spinster role in my outer office.

"He's helping that Wheeling woman buy native lace," she persisted against my silence. "You know, Mr. Merrill, her husband should be with her. I suppose *he* was too drunk by lunch to know lace from wire fencing!"

I shuffled the papers I'd been initialing, found one I'd missed, and tried to keep my attention on it. With Miss Harriwell, it wouldn't do to let her feel I gave even casual thought to gossip about the grotesque alliance between such extreme opposites as Robert Holden and Catherine Wheeling.

It was from Holden, a man I thoroughly respected, that I learned so much during the time of ugly tension on Point Dura. When trouble struck our time-lost little island outpost, he kept his balance to the last moment, a moment of terror for which he was never to be blamed. In the process, he proved to me that another influence still lives in this frantic age. A force one might call the sometimes treacherous wisdom of mercy. A stranger to Point Dura.

Life on the Point is a softly inflexible design wrought by the years, a subtle assault on the will to resist that which is easiest and most pleasurable. And through those months following my assignment to Holden's office I had fought, not too successfully, against the other-world atmos-

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phere. Living my bachelor existence in Government House Hotel, high in the silent hills above the sea, the villages and the sensuous line of the island beaches did not fully protect me. There was the close daily association with the Wheeling couple (I was Jim Wheeling's immediate superior), and Holden himself, with his white-blond eyebrows in the curiously young brown face, his voice as satiny as the climate or the skin of a native baby. Soon enough I lost my notion that a good government servant never over-identifies with his environment.

And now, with Miss Harriwell standing rigidly before me, all the little sources of dissatisfaction growing into irritation nipped at me. That vaguely moldy odor in the office. Harriwell's poll-parrot voice. Noise along the busy waterfront under the blue monotony of the sky. One courier plane a day. The false escape of liquor. Laughing primitives and bared skin — white or black, your choice, gentlemen. And farewell by this to other fine men — to blank horizons — cursing the cloth stuck to your skin . . .

I scooped together all the papers, evened their edges, and looked up. "Holden can dispose of these in the morning, Miss Harriwell. There's nothing at all urgent."

"Naturally," she grimaced. The nose-glasses on the black cord teetered and nearly tumbled from the bony face. "Mr. Holden knows his duty. I always say, he's the best superior I've ever had. I just wish —"

It slid away in what I suppose she considered a provocative manner; really, it was a spine-prickling nasal rasp. I sat back, folded my hands in my lap, and listened to my heart beating.

Almost convulsively, she clutched the papers close against her table-flat and black-hidden bosom.

"*You* can't say it's right, Mr. Merrill, and you're a friend of his! Surely he *knows* that woman's reputation! A small-town floozy like her, marrying a nice, loyal man like Mr. Wheeling and just *wrecking* him! Why! She's had *affairs* with every *white* man on the island, and now it's Mr. Holden she's got! And we don't even know about the natives she —"

"You came from a small town, didn't you, Miss Harriwell?"

"Yes!" she flared. "But I didn't *marry* into the service and then make a drunken hulk out of a good, clean boy just because living with him where his duty called wasn't as glamorous as I thought it would be! I didn't taunt him with my *lovers* until —"

I rose abruptly to my feet. "I'm going up to the hotel."

"I have only the best interest of the service —"

"You should know by now, Miss Harriwell, that I'm not a sympathetic audience for information best disseminated on rest-room walls with other four-letter words."

"*Mis*ter Merrill!"

I walked past her. "Good night," I said, and I went down to my car.

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A shower and a change of linen in the lighter breezes across the evening-shadowed hills near the hotel helped smooth me out a little. So did the regular 7 o'clock highball, cool and good in the almost empty bar, washing some of the powdered-alum taste out of my mouth.

The bar would never be entirely empty so long as Jim Wheeling was on the island. Two early couples sat near the concert grand, their murmuring indistinct beneath the drifting melody caressed from the instrument by the deceptively gentle-looking native at the keys; a table of four was almost silent in the arch to a balcony. Jim Wheeling was completely silent, squatting heavily and alone at a table near the bar. He ignored my entrance and kept his eyes fixed on the lobby arch. In his unshaven face and the soiled wrinkles of the white suit on his massive frame were the unmistakable marks of prolonged drinking.

I rolled the whiskey and crushed ice across my tongue and peered at my own reflection in the back-bar mirror, and I thought: *You'd be a fool, boy, to sign an issue slip for a face like that.* The mirror, like everything else, was old and excessively clean and unchanging. It shimmered with the face I didn't like. I swallowed the mouthful of whiskey and sneered at myself.

"Guru!"

The voice was behind me, a trifle husky, the feminine kind to disturb you and please you and leave you a little uncertain of how anything was meant.

"Robert — it's Guru! Let's be nice and talk to him."

I took another sip and looked up into the mirror. Catherine Wheeling, accompanied by Holden, was sweeping toward me. She moved directly to my side; in not the slightest way did she recognize the presence of her husband. Conversation in the bar paused in mid-phrase, then continued a little self-consciously.

"We've decided to talk to you, Guru." Catherine Wheeling slid a full figure in a neatly tailored white slack suit on the stool beside me and brushed her long fingers slowly down my sleeve.

"Oh, lovely," I said.

"Listen to him," she laughed, turning to Holden. "Now he's going to be sarcastic, Robert. Did you learn that at tea-and-crumpets school, Guru?"

"Don't call him Guru," said Holden quietly. Behind him, Jim Wheeling suddenly lurched to his feet and, swaying, scowled at the three of us.

Catherine ignored her husband, kept her eyes on Holden.

"Please tell me why not?"

"His name is Merrill," said Holden. "Call him Merrill."

"But he's a Guru, darling. He's a spiritual leader for us. Don't you see?"

"I see you're obscene."

The native bartender, Billy X., stood patiently through all this, his dark high-boned face waiting very still over the white mess jacket. But Catherine Wheeling always refused to recognize the possibility that those

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she held to be lesser beings, like bartenders and fourth assistants, might have ears and, very often, excellent minds.

"We'll drink with you, Guru Merrill — there you see, Robert, I please you with his proper name." Her eyes darkened swiftly, raking Holden's impassive face. "I'm always doing something to please you — you of all men! Isn't that fine?"

Holden did not move or reply. His frosty gray stare settled on Catherine's and so the two of them remained for a moment between the challenge and the most peculiar reaction I've ever witnessed. Suddenly, Catherine's head jerked so sharply one would have thought, from a distance, that she'd been slapped. She whirled toward me, recovering like a champion — which she was not. Unless they're offering different titles this season.

"We'd so very much like to be uplifted, Guru," she smiled. Her own particular smile. "But let's sit at a table. Shall we?"

She turned and gave the order, and Holden said, "You've had enough, haven't you?" She turned back to him; it was a very complete sort of movement, as if her whole body turned on him and came up to point like a good dog when the birds are near. She slowly brushed her palm back over the long and whitely parted hair that looked so darkly alive, and she looked from Holden to me and back to Holden with the green eyes like rain-washed glass.

Then she turned her head, just her head, and said over her shoulder to the bartender: "Make mine a double, Billy X., and send it to the table."

We followed her free, long-legged walk away from the bar. There was nothing else to do without risking an even bigger scene. Holden, short and wiry, paced softly along beside me.

Wheeling had not moved from where he stood by his table, leaning his weight on one fist driven down against the ash-littered top. Now he followed us with his eyes, his body still as a statue. Catherine's choice was a withdrawn corner at the edge of a window opening wide above the lowering hills and beyond the red-roofed administration buildings to the inky convergence of sea and sky. We settled down with every questioning thought in the room slyly probing toward us.

Wheeling moved. His progress across the room was pitiful. Once the hard-bodied university athlete and "bright young man" in the service — before he married Catherine — he stumbled toward us, upsetting a chair and jarring a table. No greetings were exchanged when he fell into a chair in our group.

Holden carefully fitted a cigarette between his lips and offered the case to Catherine. She accepted, lighting with matches from a pocket in the white suit, ignoring Jim Wheeling's fumbling offer of flame from his lighter. The drinks were brought and we lifted our glasses. No one looked openly at Wheeling, and he saw no one but Catherine.

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"Let's not say chin-chin or cheers, or anything like that," smiled Catherine, watching me. "Guru wouldn't mean it. Let's just drink."

"Sorry about this afternoon," Holden said to me. "I don't imagine you really needed me. Did you?"

"You're too modest," Catherine said, with that same smile. I did not like that smile at all. Not on anyone, and particularly not on Catherine. It was just a careful application of well-trained muscles around the mouth, "You know Guru worries about you. Robert."

"Robert's quite a big boy now," I said. "When he's more himself, he makes his own reports."

"You think that's biting and cryptic, Guru?"

"Not particularly."

"Yes, you do. But it isn't. Not really. If it weren't for me, your Miss Harriwell would suffer agonies. She'd have no one to talk about — except perhaps those marvelous natives, those cock-fighters."

"She's hardly 'my' Miss Harriwell," I said. "And I'm certain she wouldn't talk if she saw a fight. She'd very likely be little-girl sick."

Catherine laughed. "How poorly you understand! She'd breathe deep and live, really live, for a while."

I said, "Don't tear it apart, Catherine. All right, Harriwell was talking. So is much of the island. Shall we drop it?"

"Dear Guru! The things you do for others! But, yes, let's drop it. Let's talk about our immortal souls. You'll like that. But I don't know about Robert. Really I don't. Do cock-fighters have souls, Robert?"

She turned to Holden, who sat quite still, not looking at any of us.

"I'm sure you have a soul, Robert. You're so fair about people. And so clean and nice. Oh, I mustn't forget that. Clean. Do you think cock-fighters might be like you, Robert?"

"They're human beings," he said, slowly and very carefully. "I've watched them pray before a silver-spur match."

"Do they? Thank you, Robert. You've been considerate of me again. Such a love."

Catherine turned to me, her eyes sparkling. Jim Wheeling watched her over the top of his glass. Holden crushed his cigarette in his saucer and took up his glass.

"Guru," said Catherine. "Don't be shocked. But I'm going to a silver-spur match tomorrow."

Holden looked up, gray eyes alert under the white brows. "You can't do that. Jim's been barred, if you remember, after that last scrap with a native owner. And you can't go alone, Catherine."

She looked at Wheeling then, for the first time, and it was very unpleasant. There was a silence. Wheeling spoke his first words.

"You mustn't go alone, Catherine," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, I shan't, Jimmy!" She waved long crimson-tipped fingers, watching his face. "Our driver's taking me over. I asked him this morning and

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he promised, and you know he's a fine, sweet boy. He keeps his word."

Her lips, wide and red, curled up slightly at the corners. And with this stated defiance of taboo, something rose up between her and the thick-bodied man, spreading out and infecting the four of us. Wheeling stared at his wife and took another drink from his glass, and it was like a mechanical toy that lifts one stiff arm while nothing else moves.

I envied Holden in that moment. I think I envied him a little at all times. His smooth tanned features under the close-cropped blond hair exposed nothing of his mind. You always had a strange feeling, looking at his pleasant lack of expression, that no matter what the circumstance, here was a part of yourself — but not a part you knew very well.

"What would you call my husband?"

Catherine moved her glittering eyes toward Robert Holden, then on to me. No one spoke. She looked past me toward the bar and waved for more drinks, and no one protested.

"You're the big man here," she said to Holden. "What d'you call him? Supernumerary? Or is he too weak even for that?"

"I call him by his name, Catherine."

"His name? Really? I thought perhaps even a dear man like you would whistle."

She turned a shining look on her husband.

"He answers whistles so well. Sometimes you just have to crook your finger. When you leave him, I mean really leave him alone for a while, you can wiggle your finger. You don't have to whistle. Didn't you know that? When he sobers up he cries, and he crawls along on his hands and knees until he gets a drink or you whistle at him. I had to teach him how to drink, you know. After we met. He never drank anything but fraternity beer and I had to show him — make it straight liquor on rocks and he wouldn't get sick. That's funny, too. Isn't it?"

She reached across and patted Wheeling's cheek, dragging her nails over the skin. Parallel streaks of reddened skin sprang from beneath her claws, the flesh not exposed but responding to the vicious salute of the fingers drawing languidly to a fist. She held the fist against his chin briefly and neither of them stirred so much as a fiber.

"He was such a big man," she muttered; "a big man in our little two-acre town, and it was really fun to marry him. Marry him right out of the hands of that silly soft child he thought he wanted. He was the one way out — weren't you, Jimmy? So cute and stupid. And you get more precious every year, don't you, Jimmy?"

No one attempted to interrupt her. Billy X. brought the fresh drinks himself, but only Wheeling drank. That same toy motion, his stare on Catherine. He started his glass down toward the table and it missed the

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edge, falling to the floor with a thundering tinkle of splinters and ice. His face loosened and he wet his lips, his black hair like a wig over the face so quickly sallow under the alcoholic flush, his eyes wild-blue and dilated with sickness.

"Would you mind so much if you couldn't get a drink, Jimmy?"

His mouth opened. "Please," he said. "Please, you can't, Catherine."

She made a very abrupt movement, picking up her glass and draining it. Setting it down, she looked again at Wheeling. Then she got up and walked out of the bar.

Wheeling watched her out of sight. He sat hunched in upon himself. His sick stare came back and moved emptily over us. We said nothing. He sighed lightly then, like a tired child, and rose.

For an instant he looked down at Holden's bowed head. He did not appear to have truly focused on the smaller man, and there was an odd dignity about him. We could hear his breathing in the silence before he moved carefully through the scattered tables toward the exit his wife had taken. He didn't look back.

I lit a cigarette and met Holden's friendly gray eyes.

"My God," I said.

"Yes."

"How does he stand it? How does he sit there and take it?"

"What else can he do?"

"Leave her. She's poison."

Holden shrugged. He turned his cigarette like a burning wand in his slender fingers, watching ash fall slowly from the tip.

When Holden called me on the inter-office communicator early next afternoon, I had no notion of what he wanted. It had been a routine morning; I had not left my office nor called anyone. I found Holden sitting very erect in his old high-backed chair — a traditional item in the executive office — looking quite young and small behind the naked width of his desk. I accepted the chair he indicated.

"Wheeling hasn't been in yet today," he said icily. "I called the hotel bar. Not there. I sent a runner round to all the joints down here. Not in any one of 'em. Called Wheeling's house. The native girl, between respectful giggles, told me Catherine went across the island to the cockfights — escorted by the native driver. Half an hour later, Wheeling was after her in a taxi."

"Throwing it in his face," I said.

"Obviously."

After a pause, I said as firmly as I could, "He wouldn't be fool enough to make another scene among the natives. Granted he's no longer a first-class intelligence, I don't think —"

"I sent a driver with a car to find him and bring him back to his house under my written order." Holden waved aside the assurances. His voice, as always, was restrained. "You hop up there and meet him. Tell him he's going back home as soon as I can arrange it. In times like these, we can't afford difficulties for any of our men;

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the balance everywhere is much too precarious. You tell him that, Merrill. Tell him if he can't control that —" Holden stopped and moved restlessly in his chair, clearing his throat — "if he can't control his family life in the house up there, they'll be asked to come to the hotel. I'll take those quarters right out from under them."

I watched his face and thought of Catherine's words to him the night before. What was it, exactly, that caused this brittleness with overtones of fear in Catherine when she talked to Holden? Her contempt for Wheeling was a much simpler emotion, a feminine reaction that was old when recorded history was new; it was a situation that could be duplicated on any block of any town in our homeland, but at the Point there was no way for Catherine to camouflage herself. In this society and before Holden, she was no mystery. Was that it? — the cause of the peculiar defensiveness displayed with Holden and with no other?

Holden smiled a tired smile. "Come in and see me as soon as you get back."

The drive under close palms, on the coral road to the valley sheltering the Wheeling house, took less than ten minutes. I hurried through the drowsy atmosphere, spun into the arch of the Wheeling driveway, stopped behind the sedan parked there with the driver nowhere in evidence, and climbed out. It was the Wheeling private car, pulled up primly before the two-story white frame house built in a style favored by homesick colonists of an earlier era.

Standing there in the sun, sorting out what I might say, I heard raging sounds rip the hot, still air from a side of the house giving off on a terrace garden. I walked quickly in that direction and stopped near the open French doors. I stood there, hidden behind a bush bearing a richly-scented, velvety purple bloom.

Fury roughened Catherine Wheeling's voice almost beyond recognition.

"— can't even talk straight, you swollen clown! Look at me! What am I doing in a hole like this with a fool like you? Love you? That's fine — oh, that's good. Even my flesh is sick when you paw at me, you — you —"

Wheeling's muzzy baritone sounded vaguely. Then Catherine shrieked.

"Yes! Yes, I went with him! And he's more of a man than you ever were, you four-bit flop! You *or* your all-seeing, all-knowing, all-wise Robert Holden! Even if he is a native servant, he's more of a man than the two of you together! He doesn't drink himself stupid and he doesn't play with a woman, just to laugh and walk off —"

Again Wheeling rumbled. And Catherine drowned him out.

"Who are you to talk to me about pride? Who are you? What have you ever done for me? Yes! — he put his arm around me and even if he is a native, he didn't reek of whiskey or laugh when I kissed him! And he gave me these — you see them? Can

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you see them? Spurs! Silver spurs! And you know what I'm going to do, Jimmy? I'm going to keep them! But first I'm going to make you believe me. With them. I should've done — *this* — a long time ago —"

Wheeling's tortured bellow smothered the last of Catherine's tirade. Simultaneously with that came the bright arc of something soaring from the open doors and through the air, chunking onto the thick grass of the terrace garden. The silver spurs, linked together.

His right hand pressed to his cheek and blood oozing through the fingers from the wound in his flesh, Jim Wheeling staggered into the sunlight. He bent down and snatched up the spurs, staring at them. Then he turned slowly, stuffing them into the pocket of his crumpled white suit coat. Catherine Wheeling moved to the doors behind him.

Her features were soapy-white under the tan. Her hands hung in fists at her thighs. They faced each other in silence and I thought of the way *banderilleros* watch the bull to measure the effect of darts placed in his hide. But they respect the bull. They respect him or perhaps die. There was no respect in Catherine Wheeling's hard green eyes.

"I'm getting away from you," she said. Her voice was flat now, and very quiet. "Clever of you, Jimmy. Knocking his little gift out of my hand. Perhaps I should've used them on your neck, not your face. But I'm leaving you, Jimmy, while I still have something to give. While I can still dance to a good orchestra and a man doesn't look through me when I walk past his table — while most of them still want to touch me. Until I get out of here, Jimmy, I'll be at the hotel — but I don't want to see you. Understand? I don't want you near me!"

She whirled and disappeared. Wheeling stood on the sun-drenched grass, his black hair tumbled, his eyes leveled at the spot where his wife had been standing. He didn't move, didn't seem to be breathing.

I got away from there and back in the car, and down the half-moon of the driveway as quietly as I could. I pressed the gas pedal to the floor and concentrated on driving, gripping the wheel and sweating.

I headed toward the beach. If I'd thought of it, I might have prayed that no native cart would creak out into the road ahead of me.

Holden looked up when I threw open the door of his office. He lifted his colorless brows at my expression and turned his wrist over to check his watch.

"That was quick," he said. "Didn't you find him?"

"I found him — and Catherine," I said. "Holden, it's a good thing I've a strong stomach. This — this is the —"

I stopped and sat down quickly. Holden folded his arms on the edge of his desk and looked at me with calm gray eyes.

"Tell me what happened."

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I went over it, missing nothing. Holden listened, turning in his fingers a native knife he uses as a letter opener, pressing the needle-like point against his thumb. When I finished, he dropped the knife and sighed.

He rested his head against his hand in a manner which made a visor of his fingers, hiding his eyes. With his free hand, he stroked the clean-looking length of the native knife. "Merrill, I've come to know you pretty well. I'd like to think that we're friends?"

I said, "Of course."

"All right. We can't, at this time, risk having one of our men — however much of a broken stick he may have become — get in over his head through difficulties which he may not fully deserve."

I remained silent.

"I must say — it's obvious to you, of course — that I know Catherine. Pretty well. It's not being a laundered little gentleman to say so, Merrill, but she isn't worth it. Depending on what kind of man you are, you may or may not see that in time with someone like her. She married Wheeling only because of some exaggerated idea of the glories and prestige attaching to the service. It's been my privilege to sit by and watch him falling apart under the humiliation of his wife's behavior."

Holden straightened up and aimed his gray stare at me.

"I know what you're thinking, Merrill. You're wondering how I can talk in this fashion about someone you suspect me of having loved. Some day I may tell you whether or not your suspicions are justified. In the meantime, it's none of your affair — if only to spare you further confusion. I'll tell you this: I'm sorry I ever so much as had a drink with that woman.

"I hope, my friend, that she really has gone to the hotel. While you were in the valley, I put through a cable recommending administrative recall for Wheeling. That sends him back with a clean nose. Once that couple gets home, whatever happens can be more easily dealt with or hushed up — and that's what counts. That's all that counts."

I stood up and shook my trousers down over the damp skin of my legs. My breath came freely again. I met his gaze.

He smiled at me and patted his palms soundlessly against the top of his desk. He said, "Thanks, Merrill."

I moved to the door and paused to look back. Holden had stopped smiling and it was as if he had never smiled.

"See you in the bar at 7," he said.

Tension nagged me through the rest of the day, but in fresh clothing after a long shower and with my highball before me in the hotel bar I felt slightly more relaxed. I checked my face in the aged mirror behind the bar and the face hadn't really changed any more than the mirror itself. I drained my glass, ordered another, and looked up to see Holden's trim outline in the reflection.

He rested a small-boned hand on

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my shoulder and lifted a finger to Billy X. His eyes looked sunken under the white brows. I think he may have had something he wanted to say, but immediately he sat down there was a stir rising above the idle talk in the room behind us and Wheeling burst through the lobby arch. He skidded to a halt and stood swinging his head from side to side in a queerly heavy motion. A snowy surgical bandage covered his right cheek, clean against the black of his hair and the flush of his face. He charged the bar like an enraged water buffalo, bellowed for whiskey, and tossed it off.

He glared along the bar at us. "Calls me names — names like a dog you don't own. In front of everybody — walks off — and tells me I'm not as much of a man as my servant. Took the spurs he gave her — and she cut — I'm —"

His voice strangled in his throat. He pulled himself up, gripping the edge of the teakwood bar to stay erect. A leer stained his face.

"This time, Holden — she — included you. Didn't guess she'd ever do that, did you? Did somethin' to her, Holden — you must have done somethin'. This time — she's — gonna kill herself. She says. I believe her. One damn fight after another — it's awful. I do believe her — can't stop her." He stared at us out of blood-laced blue eyes, lifting his hand in a childlike gesture toward the bandage on his cheek. "She cut my face."

Holden and I exchanged glances as Wheeling slipped and caught himself up again on the bar, coming around between us to grip my shoulder.

"Won't you do something, Merrill? Please won't you stop her? Left me, Merrill — came down here and up in her room waving my old Army — pistol — radio turned up and the lights out. Drinking and won't lemme in. I tried, Merrill. Won't lemme see her. Crazy, I tell you. Please. Please — help —"

Holden turned full on Wheeling while I gingerly removed myself from the big man's grasp.

"Stop blubbering," said Holden. "What in God's name do you think we can do, Jim? House phone over there on the bar. Call her. Talk to her."

Wheeling showed his teeth again.

"Suits you — fine — doesn' it?"

"Shut up, Jim."

"Sure. Shut — up. Big boss — gets — off easy."

"You're making it worse."

"I'll shut — up. So'll — Catherine."

"Good. You're going home. Both of you."

"Yeah. Home."

"You'll both be happier."

Wheeling scowled blearily down at him while Holden, poised but taut as a drumhead, took his cigarette case from his jacket pocket. The smooth metal slipped from his fingers. Wheeling scooped the case up in mid-air before it could strike the floor, silently handing it back to Holden after only a moment's hesitation. An odd sound came up from the throat

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of the bulky-shouldered man and he stumbled to the telephone sitting on the end of the bar. His broad back toward us, the instrument cuddled against his chest as he crouched over it, he commenced talking after a bit, purring into the receiver, then almost shouting, then pleading, then threatening, then purring again. It was an awful din.

Holden took my arm. "Come along," he said softly.

We got through the arch, past the curious eyes, and into the high-beamed lobby. Holden halted there at the foot of the wide staircase. He said, "Wait here," and walked swiftly to the registry desk. I watched him and Wheeling. Wheeling went on talking.

Holden spoke to the slender and dignified old native presiding over both the desk and the telephone switchboard. The native nodded, then shook his head. And Holden came back across the lobby. He glanced briefly at Wheeling still bent over the bar phone.

"Let's go see Catherine," he said.

We climbed the steps two at a time, passing at a trot the broad intermediate landing between the interior staircase and the old stone balcony and stairs outside the hotel to seaward. A radio blared continental dance music from the far end of the spacious but shadowed and empty second-floor hall. Moving toward the sound, we came face to face with a lumpy female in bent hair curlers and a vicious pink robe who yanked open her door, tracked us with a pair of eyes as friendly as two gas-tank caps, threw a look toward the music, and slammed the door. Holden ignored her.

Stopping before Catherine Wheeling's door, he looked up at me and took hold of the knob. It turned easily. He glanced down the hall, then threw the door wide. A blast from the radio hit us and we went in almost shoulder to shoulder. Light was fading in the room and had that peculiar blue tinge you find for a few moments each evening in the tropics. The doors to the tiny balcony were open to the sky and a last bit of twilight touched the figure of Catherine Wheeling. She was sprawled in the depths of a wicker chair, an overturned highball glass on the floor at her feet.

Holden shook his head when I moved to turn off the radio. He stepped back, closed the door and threw the heavy brass bolt, and walked toward Catherine Wheeling. Standing with his thumbs looped in his jacket pockets, making no attempt to touch her, he waited until I joined him. Then he dipped his head and, above the radio's racket, said: "Look."

She lay with that fine head turned to the left and against the back of the chair. A small hole with a faintly seared lip broke the smooth plane of her right temple. And a dark stain spread out under the thick black hair, down over the shoulder of her favorite white slack suit. Her right hand

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lay between her thighs, the long fingers loosely grasping a regulation pistol.

Holden leaned across the body and snapped on a lamp recessed in the wall. He touched the stain on the white shoulder and the skin over a cheekbone with his forefinger. Then he walked slowly around the room, examining without touching everything within the four walls. He stopped at the dressing table. Catherine's purse was there.

Beside it lay a pair of silver gamecock spurs.

Holden slowly turned his head in my direction. I didn't speak, didn't move. He carefully placed the immaculate little punishers in his pocket, took another long tour of the room with his eyes, pausing at the body with a total lack of expression, and walked out onto the balcony.

I followed gratefully, away from the presence of death and the irreverent blatting of the radio, and filled my lungs with the clean air of evening. But Holden prowled. He stopped, grunting lightly, and reached into the soil filling the flower boxes which rimmed the balcony. He probed in the dirt and came up with a cigarette butt. He checked over the entire balcony again, then came back to me, holding the butt in his palm.

"Merrill," he said softly. "Look here what the fool did."

He held the warped stub toward me. "It hasn't been in the soil of that box long enough to even begin to soak or stain," he said. "And you see there's no lipstick on it. She didn't smoke it."

He turned the remains of the cigarette over with an exploratory finger, closed his fist around it, and looked out toward the dying light over the hills. Almost reluctantly, his attention came back to me.

"We have a problem," he murmured, watching me carefully from under the white brows.

There was no answer to that.

Holden dipped his head again. "I suppose this last playful maneuver of hers was just enough to push him over the edge. If — and here's a sweet little technicality in the moral principle for you to kick around some sleepless night — if he'd pulled the trigger when she went after him with the spurs, it could reasonably be represented as self-defense." He made an impatient gesture with the hand holding the dead cigarette and his tone took an edge. "But why couldn't he just let her go?"

"Didn't he?" I said.

Holden paid no heed to me. "It's not at all in character for people like Catherine Wheeling to destroy themselves. Certainly she was unhappy — she would always be unhappy in whatever situation. But she'd never destroy herself because of it. She'd destroy others and delight in it.

"And the rest of this! He didn't ring this room when he tumbled into that phone trick in the bar. He must have held the circuit-breaker down — the desk man told me she checked in here in the middle of the afternoon

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and there've been no calls for her at any time. You saw him talking away into the phone at the very moment I was with the man who would've plugged through any such connection. The fellow told me Wheeling inquired at 5 o'clock if his wife had registered, then went upstairs. There have been two subsequent complaints about the radio. If there was another, the management would be regretfully forced to speak to 'the good lady'!"

Holden's nostrils spread with disgust as he repeated the accepted native phrase used in referring to white women. His stare cut through the haze of twilight toward me.

"And Wheeling was not drunk, Merrill. Not in the sense that real drinkers get stiff. Witness the lightning athlete's reflex to the cigarette case I let fall in the bar.

"He said she wouldn't let him in — yet he described how she was carrying on and the door was not locked. The blood from the wound is partially dry. You can be sure the radio muffled the sound of the shot for those few persons in residence here. The gift spurs you saw him pocket were with her purse, though that in itself isn't important. She could've repossessed them at the house.

"Then this cigarette. He stood out here and smoked, probably timing his entrance into the bar with the regular 7 o'clock crowd. Sure to find us then. If he smoked *before* the showdown came and he dealt with her, the butts are over the balcony rail. Where this should be!"

Holden crushed the stub between his palms and rolled it until only a mass of tobacco and paper remained. This he threw over the side and walked stiff-legged back into the room. He carefully smudged without wiping clean every likely interior surface, including the surfaces of the pistol and the glass. Smearing the light switch and its panel, he left the light burning.

Out on the balcony once more, he patted his palms together very lightly and looked about, finally directing his stare at me. Silence. Then —

"Say it!"

His voice lashed at me, and I stiffened.

"I'm wondering," I told him, "why Wheeling would kill, then attempt to shape it as a suicide — when there were so many likely candidates for the role of murderer."

"You mean me, of course."

"You're the most recent. And Catherine's reaction to you was the most positive any man ever provoked."

Holden studied me briefly, then laughed softly. "Why do you suppose she hated you and feared me? Because neither of us could be added to her leash, you because you instinctively dislike the predatory type of woman, and me . . . well, I enjoyed watching her parade her cheap tricks and felt that some sort of unrecorded justice was being done when I humiliated her as she had humiliated other men."

"Specifically Jim Wheeling?"

"Yes."

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"That's a streak in you I never suspected."

He shrugged. "Call it cruel — if it suits you. Call it foolish. Whatever you call it, understand one thing. Told myself I'd never discuss it — even with you — but you should understand that I never loved Catherine. I'm not sorry she's dead. But I had nothing to do with her death."

"Except the suspicion in her husband's mind."

Holden moved to the balcony rail. "There's that, of course," he said, peering over the side, indrawn again.

The top of an ancient papaw tree just reached the overhanging scroll of the balcony and its flower boxes, near the darkened and seldom-used ballroom. Holden really smiled at me for the first time that evening.

"Have to risk it my friend," he said. "Messy — but necessary. Damn the architects who go arty with individual balconies! I'll go first."

He hopped to the rail, balanced, cleared the flowering boxes, and dropped away into the darkness. I watched him hook a branch with one hand and another with his dark-trousered knee. And he was quickly down, his face and blond hair a lighter patch turned up to me in the gathering murk at the roots of the tree. I followed, not quite so gracefully but just as quickly.

"Suppose we take a blow near the old outside stairs," said Holden wryly. We rounded the corner of the building and came out on the side nearest the sea. "Anyone happens to ask awkward questions about how we got down after we went up — here we are."

He sat down on a weather-worn bench and lit a cigarette, offering me the case. We smoked without talking and the night closed in with the hushed speed of all such nights in this part of the world.

Holden stirred after several silent minutes. He flipped his cigarette away into the darkness.

"I don't suppose," he sighed, "anyone topside would touch us with a barge pole after this. But they really needn't know, Merrill. These island police will never embarrass us with inspired bursts of energy. Occasionally takes something better than cocky-caps, shiny boots, and the authority of a gun to punish murder."

He stood up then, pressing his fists into the muscles at the base of his spine, wearily arching his back. Below us, the foaming white fingers of the sea breaking over the coral reefs was a distant and rhythmical force barely seen and scarcely heard. Holden brushed his handkerchief at a tree-bark smudge on his jacket and wiped tiredly at his hands and face.

"Well," he said. "Let's go in and give our man his spurs."

Eight days after Holden's stage-setting the police were, as predicted, relapsing into contentment. Catherine was prepared for her last journey. Everything moved along almost precisely, like a polite puppet show, until Jim Wheeling gave force and

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meaning to Holden's words on the forfeit for killers not government-approved.

Wheeling was to escort his wife's body home, of course, and the intimate pressures of guilt and remorse, compounded by Harriwell-type yattering over Catherine's past and her violent end, caused him to drink almost incessantly for the several days preceding his final scene in Robert Holden's office.

When the unshaven big man burst in upon him in the oppressive heat of late afternoon, Holden had the quick mind to open my switch on the inter-office communicator. I caught the sound of breathing near the instrument, the quick silence, and Wheeling's slurred voice accusing Holden of being Catherine's most cherished companion, the ultimate cause of her disaffection for him. And as I started to move out for the executive office, there was Holden's sharp: "Jim! Don't be an idiot!"

The outer office was mercifully empty, Harriwell having enjoyed an attack of lingering vapors after being shyly questioned two days earlier by a routine group of sleepy police. Holden's door was standing open. A glance was sufficient to justify quickly entering and closing it.

Leaping across the desk, Wheeling had got by the throat the man who had sought to protect him. Holden was being bent cruelly back and over the arm of the old leather chair, his body writhing beneath the weight of the big man. At the instant I closed in to save him, Holden, not seeing me through eyes already glazing under the strangling grip, managed to twist obliquely toward the desk and reach the native knife he favored as a letter opener.

Down on one knee, with a strangely diminished motion like a death reflex, Holden struck the long bright blade once, twice, three times upward into Wheeling's abdomen.

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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

MISS PAISLEY'S CAT

by ROY VICKERS

THERE ARE THOSE WHO HAVE A special affection for cats, and there are those who hold them in physical and even moral abhorrence. The belief lingers that cats have been known to influence a human being — generally an old maid, and generally for evil. It is true that Miss Paisley's cat was the immediate cause of that emotionally emaciated old maid reaching a level of perverted greatness — or stark infamy, according to one's point of view. But this can be explained without resort to mysticism. The cat's behavior was catlike throughout.

Miss Paisley's cat leaped into her life when she was 54 and the cat itself was probably about two. Miss Paisley was physically healthy and active — an inoffensive, neatly dressed, self-contained spinster. The daughter of a prosperous businessman — her mother had died while the child was a toddler — she had passed her early years in the golden age of the middle classes, when every detached suburban villa had many of the attributes of a baronial hall: if there was no tenantry there was always a handful of traditionally obsequious tradesmen — to say nothing of a resident domestic staff.

She was eighteen, at a "finishing school" in Paris, when her father contracted pneumonia and died while in the course of reorganizing his business. Miss Paisley inherited the furniture of the house, a couple of hundred in cash, and an annuity of £120.

Her relations, in different parts of the country, rose to the occasion. Without expert advice they pronounced her unfit for further education or training and decided that, among them, they must marry her off — which ought not to be difficult. Miss Paisley was never the belle of a ball of any size, but she was a good-looking girl, with the usual graces and accomplishments.

In the first round of visits she accepted the warm assurances of welcome at their face value — yet she was not an unduly conceited girl. It was her father who had given her the belief that her company was a boon in itself. The technique of the finishing school, too, had been based on a similar assumption.

During the second round of visits — in units of some six months — she made the discovery that her company was tolerated rather than desired — a harsh truth from which she sought immediate escape.

There followed an era of nursery

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governessing and the companioning of old ladies. The children were hard work and the old ladies were very disappointing.

Penuriousness and old ladies were turning her into a humble creature, thankful for the crumbs of life. In her early twenties she obtained permanent employment as a "female clerk" in a government office. She made her home in Rumbold Chambers, Marpleton, about fifteen miles out of London, and about a mile from the house that had once been her father's. The Chambers — in this sense a genteel, Edwardian word meaning flatlets — had already seen better days, and were to see worse.

The rent would absorb nearly half her annuity; but the Chambers, she believed, had tone. The available flatlet looked over the old cemetery to the Seventeenth-Century bridge across the river. She signed a life lease. Thus, she was in that flatlet when the cat came, 32 years later.

She had taken out of the warehouse as much furniture as would go into the flatlet. The walls were adorned with six enlarged photographs, somewhat pompously framed, of the house and garden that had been her father's.

The radio came into general use; the talkies appeared and civil aviation was getting into its stride — events which touched her life not at all. Light industry invaded Marpleton and district. Every three months or so she would walk past her old home, until it was demolished to make room for a factory.

If she made no enemies, she certainly made no friends. The finishing school had effectively crippled her natural sociability. At the end of her working day she would step back 30-odd years into her past.

When the cat appeared, Miss Paisley was talking vivaciously to herself, as is the habit of the solitary.

"I sometimes think father made a mistake in keeping it as a croquet lawn. Croquet is so old-fashioned . . . *Oh!* How on earth did you get here!"

The cat had apparently strolled on to the windowsill — a whole story plus some four feet above ground level. "Animals aren't allowed in the Chambers, so you must go . . . Go, please. *Whooosh!*"

The cat blinked and descended, somewhat awkwardly, into the room.

"What an ugly cat! I shall never forget Aunt Lisa's Persian. It looked beautiful, and everybody made an absurd fuss of it. I don't suppose anybody ever wants to stroke *you*. People tolerate you, rather wishing you didn't exist, poor thing!" The cat was sitting on its haunches, staring at Miss Paisley. "Oh, well, I suppose you can stay to tea. I've no fish, but there's some bloater paste I forgot to throw away — and some milk left over from yesterday."

Miss Paisley set about preparing tea for herself. It was Saturday afternoon. Chocolate biscuits and two cream eclairs for today, and chocolate biscuits and two meringues for Sunday. When the kettle had

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boiled and she had made the tea, she scraped out a nearly empty tin of bloater paste, spreading it on a thin slice of dry bread. She laid a newspaper on the floor — the carpet had been cut out of the drawing-room carpet of 34 years ago. The cat, watching these preparations, purred its approval.

"Poor thing! It's pathetically grateful," said Miss Paisley, placing the bloater paste and a saucer of yesterday's milk on the newspaper.

The cat lowered its head, sniffed the bloater paste, but did not touch it. It tried the milk, lapped once, then again sat back on its haunches and stared at Miss Paisley.

The stare of Miss Paisley's cat was not pleasing to humanity. It was, of course, a normal cat's stare from eyes that were also normal, though they appeared not to be, owing to a streak of white fur that ran from one eyelid to the opposite ear, then splashed over the spine. A wound from an airgun made one cheek slightly shorter than the other, revealing a glimpse of teeth and giving the face the suggestion of a human sneer. Add that it had a stiff left foreleg, which made its walk ungainly, and you have a very ugly cat — a standing challenge to juvenile marksmanship.

"You're a stupid cat, too," said Miss Paisley. "You don't seem to make the most of your opportunities."

Miss Paisley sat down to tea. The cat leaped onto the table, seized one of the eclairs, descended cautiously, and devoured the eclair on the carpet, several inches from the newspaper.

This time it was Miss Paisley who stared at the cat.

"That is most extraordinary behavior!" she exclaimed. "You thrust yourself upon me when I don't want you. I treat you with every kindness —"

The cat had finished the eclair. Miss Paisley continued to stare. Then her gaze shifted to her own hand which seemed to her to be moving independently of her will. She watched herself pick up the second eclair and lower it to the cat, who tugged it from her fingers.

She removed the saucer under her still empty tea cup, poured today's milk into it, and placed the saucer on the floor. She listened, fascinated, while the cat lapped it all. Her pulse was thudding with the excitement of a profound discovery.

Then, for the first time in 30-odd years, Miss Paisley burst into tears.

"Go away!" she sobbed. "I don't want you. It's too late — *I'm 54!*"

By the time her breath was coming easily again, the cat had curled up on the Chesterfield that was really Miss Paisley's bed.

It was a month or more before Miss Paisley knew for certain that she hoped the cat would make its home with her. Her attitude was free

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from the kind of sentimentality which one associates with an old maid and a cat. She respected its cathood, attributed to it no human qualities. The relationship was too subtle to have need of pretense. Admittedly, she talked to it a great deal. But she talked as if to a room-mate, who might or might not be attending. In this respect, the cat's role could be compared with that of a paid companion.

"Excuse me, madam!" Jenkins, the watchdog and rent-collector, who had replaced the porter of palmier days, had stopped her in the narrow hall. "Would that cat with the black-and-white muzzle be yours by any chance?"

A month ago, Miss Paisley would have dithered with apology for breaking the rules and would have promised instant compliance.

"It is my cat, Jenkins. And I would be very glad to pay you half a crown a week for any trouble it may be to you."

"That's very kind of you, madam, and thank you. What I was goin' to say was that I saw it jump out o' Mr. Rinditch's window with a bit o' fish in its mouth what Mr. Rinditch had left from his breakfast." He glanced down the passage to make sure that Mr. Rinditch's door was shut. "You know what Mr. Rinditch is!"

Miss Paisley knew that he was a street bookmaker, with a number of runners who took the actual bets, and that Jenkins stood in awe of him as the only tenant of any financial substance. Mr. Rinditch was a stocky, thickset man with a large sullen face and a very large neck. Miss Paisley thought he looked vulgar, which was a matter of character, whereas the other tenants only looked common, which they couldn't help.

"I'll give it proper cat's-meat, then it won't steal."

"Thank you, madam."

The "madam" cost Miss Paisley about £4 a year. None of the other women were "madam," and none of the men were "sir" — not even Mr. Rinditch. Two pounds at Christmas and odd half crowns for small, mainly superfluous services. For Miss Paisley it was a sound investment. In her dream life she was an emigrée awaiting recall to a style of living which, did she but know it, had virtually ceased to exist in England. It was as if the 30-odd years of unskilled clerical labor were a merely temporary expedient. Through the cat she was acquiring a new philosophy, but the dream was untouched.

"I have to cut your meat," she explained that evening, "and I'm rather dreading it. You see, I've never actually handled raw meat before. It was *not* considered a necessary item in my education. Though I remember once — we were on a river picnic — two of the servants with the hamper were being driven over . . ."

She had to ask Jenkins's advice. He lent her a knife — a formidable object with a black handle and a

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blade tapering to a point. A French knife, he told her, and she could buy one like it at any ironmonger's — which she did on the following day. There remained the shuddery business of handling the meat. She sacrificed a memento — a pair of leather driving gloves, which she had worn for horse-riding during her holidays from school.

On the third day of the fourth month the cat failed to appear at its meal-time. Miss Paisley was disturbed. She went to bed an hour later than usual, to lie awake until dawn, struggling against the now inescapable fact that the cat had become necessary to her, though she was unable to guess why this should be true. She tried to prove it was not true. She knew how some old maids doted upon a particular cat, perpetually fondling it and talking baby-talk to it. For her cat she felt nothing at all of that kind of emotion. She knew that her cat was rather dirty, and she never really liked touching it. Indeed, she did not like cats, as such. But there was something about this particular cat . . .

The cat came through the open window shortly after dawn. Miss Paisley got out of bed and uncovered the meat. The cat yawned, stretched, and ignored it, then jumped onto the foot of her bed, circled, and settled down, asleep before Miss Paisley's own head returned to her pillow. Miss Paisley was now cat-wise enough to know that it must have fed elsewhere, from which she drew the alarming inference that a cat which had strayed once might stray again.

The next day she bought a collar, had it engraved with her name and address and, in brackets, £1 *Reward for Return*. She could contemplate expenditure of this kind without unease because, in the 30-odd years, she had saved more than £500.

That evening she fastened the collar in position. The cat pulled it off. Miss Paisley unfastened the special safety buckle and tried again — tried five times before postponing further effort.

"Actually, you yourself have taught me how to handle this situation," she said the following evening. "You refused the bloater paste and the not very fresh milk. You were right! Now, it will be a great pity if we have to quarrel and see no more of each other, but — no collar — no meat!"

After small initial misunderstandings the cat accepted the collar for the duration of the meal. On the third evening the cat forgot to scratch it off after the meal. In a week, painstaking observation revealed that the cat had become unconscious of the collar. Even when it scratched the collar in the course of scratching itself, it made no effort to remove the collar. It wore the collar for the rest of its life.

After the collar incident, their relationship was established on a firmer footing. She bought herself

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new clothes — including a hat that was too young for her and a lumber jacket in suede as green as a cat's eyes. There followed a month of tranquillity, shadowed only by a warning from Jenkins that the cat had failed to shake off its habit of visiting Mr. Rinditch's room. She noticed something smarmy in the way Jenkins told her about it — as if he enjoyed telling her. For the first time, there came to her the suspicion that the "madam" was ironic and a source of amusement to Jenkins.

On the following Saturday came evidence that, in this matter at least, Jenkins had spoken truly. She would reach home shortly after 1 on Saturdays. While she was on her way across the hall to the staircase, the door of Mr. Rinditch's room opened. Mr. Rinditch's foot was visible, as was Miss Paisley's cat. The cat was projected some four feet across the corridor. As it struck the paneling of the staircase, Miss Paisley felt a violent pain in her own ribs. She rushed forward, tried to pick up her cat. The cat spat at her and hobbled away. For a moment she stared after it, surprised and hurt by its behavior. Then, suddenly, she brightened.

"You won't accept pity!" she murmured. She tossed her head, and her eyes sparkled with a kind of happiness that was new to her. She knocked on Mr. Rinditch's door. When the large, sullen face appeared, she met it with a catlike stare.

"You kicked my cat!"

"Your cat, is it! Then I'll thank you to keep it out o' my room."

"I regret the trespass —"

"So do I. If I catch 'im in 'ere again, he'll swing for it, and it's me tellin' yer." Mr. Rinditch slammed his door.

Miss Paisley, who affected an ignorance of cockney idiom, asked herself what the words meant. As they would bear an interpretation which she would not allow her imagination to accept, she assured herself they meant nothing. She began to wonder at her own audacity in bearding a coarse, tough man like Mr. Rinditch, who might well have started a brawl.

In the meantime, the cat had gone up the stairs and was waiting for her at the door of her apartment. It still did not wish to be touched. But when Miss Paisley rested in her easy chair before preparing her lunch, the cat, for the first time, jumped onto her lap. It growled and changed its position, steadying itself with its claws, which penetrated Miss Paisley's dress and pricked her. Then it settled down, purred a little, and went to sleep. The one-time dining-room clock chimed 2 o'clock: Miss Paisley discovered that she was not hungry.

On Sunday the cat resumed its routine, and seemed none the worse. It tackled its meat ration with avidity, and wound up with Miss Paisley's other meringue. But that did not excuse the gross brutality of Mr. Rinditch. On Monday morning Miss Paisley stopped Jenkins on the first-floor landing and asked for Mr. Rinditch's full name, explaining that

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she intended to apply for a summons for cruelty to animals.

"If you'll excuse me putting in a word, madam, you won't get your own back on *him* by gettin' him fined ten bob. Why, he pays some-think like £50 a month in fines for 'is runners — thinks no more of it than you think o' your train fare."

Miss Paisley was somewhat dashed. Jenkins enlarged.

"You'd be surprised, madam, at the cash that comes his way. The night before a big race, he'll be home at 6 with more'n a couple o' hundred pound in that bag o' his; then he'll go out at a quarter to 8, do his round of the pubs, and be back at 10:30 with as much cash again."

The amount of the fine, Miss Paisley told herself, was irrelevant. This was a matter of principle. The lawyer, whom she consulted during her lunch hour, failed to perceive the principle. He told her that she could not prove her statements: that, as the cat admittedly bore no sign of the attack, the case would be "laughed out of court."

She had never heard that phrase before, and she resented it, the resentment being tinged with fear.

When she reached home, she found the cat crouching on the far side of the escritoire. It took no notice of her, but she could wait no longer to unburden herself.

"We should be laughed out of court," she said. "In other words, Mr. Rinditch can kick us, and the Law will laugh at us for being kicked. I expect we look very funny when we are in pain!"

In the whole of Miss Paisley's life that was the unluckiest moment for that particular remark. If her eyes had not been turned inward, she could have interpreted the behavior of the cat, could not have failed to recognize that its position by the escritoire was strategic. She was still talking about her interview with the lawyer when the cat pounced, then turned in her direction, a live mouse kicking in its jaws.

"Oh, dear!" She accepted the situation with a sigh. She was without the physiological fear of mice — thought them pretty little things and would have encouraged them but for their unsanitary habits.

Now, Miss Paisley knew — certainly from the cliche, if not from experience — the way of a cat with a mouse. Yet it took her by surprise, creating an unmanageable conflict.

"Don't — oh, *don't!* Stop! Can't you see? . . . We're no better than Mr. Rinditch! Oh, God, please make him stop! I can't endure it. I *mustn't* endure it! Isn't it any use praying? Are You laughing, too?"

Physical movement was not at Miss Paisley's command, just then. The feeling of cold in her spine turned to heat, and spread outwards over her body, tingling as it spread. In her ears was the sound of crackling, like the burning of dried weeds.

Her breathing ceased to be painful. The immemorial ritual claimed first her attention, then her interest.

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After some minutes, Miss Paisley tittered. Then she giggled. The cat, which can create in humanity so many illusions about itself, seemed to be playing its mouse to a gallery, and playing hard for a laugh.

Miss Paisley laughed.

There were periods of normality, of uneventful months in which one day was indistinguishable from another, and Miss Paisley thought of herself as an elderly lady who happened to keep a cat.

She deduced that the cat wandered a good deal, and sometimes begged or stole food from unknown persons. She had almost persuaded herself that it had abandoned its perilous habit of visiting Mr. Rinditch's flatlet. One evening in early summer, about a fortnight before the end came, this hope was dashed.

At about half-past 8 the cat had gone out, after its evening meal. Miss Paisley was looking out of her window, idly awaiting its return. Presently she saw it on top of the wall that divided the yard from the old burial ground. She waved to it; it stared at her, then proceeded to wash itself, making a ten-minute job of it. Then it slithered down via the tool shed, but instead of making straight for the drainpipe that led past Miss Paisley's windowsill, it changed direction. By leaning out of the window, she could obtain an oblique view of Mr. Rinditch's rear window.

She hurried downstairs along the corridor, past Mr. Rinditch's door to the door that gave onto the yard, skirted a group of six ashcans, and came to Mr. Rinditch's window, which was open about eighteen inches at the bottom. She could see the cat on Mr. Rinditch's bed. She knew she could not tempt it with food so soon after its main meal. She called coaxingly, then desperately.

"We are in great danger," she whispered. "Don't you care?"

The cat stared at her, then closed its eyes. Miss Paisley took stock of the room. It was sparsely but not inexpensively furnished. The paneling was disfigured with calendars and metal coat-hooks.

The sill was more than four feet from the ground. She put her shoulders in the gap, and insinuated herself. She grasped the cat by its scruff, with one finger under its collar, and retained her hold while she scrambled to the safety of the yard, neglecting to lower the window to its usual position. They both reached her apartment without meeting anyone.

During that last fortnight which remained to them, Miss Paisley received — as she would have expressed it — a final lesson from the cat. She was returning from work on a warm evening. When some 50 yards from the chambers, she saw the cat sunning itself on the pavement. From the opposite direction came a man with a Labrador dog on a leash. Suddenly the dog bounded, snatching the leash from the man's hand.

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"*Danger!* Run a-way!" screamed Miss Paisley.

The cat saw its enemy a second too late. Moreover, its stiff leg put flight out of the question. While Miss Paisley ran forward, feeling the dog's hot breath on the back of her neck, she nerved herself for the breaking of her bones. And then, as it seemed to her, the incredible happened. The dog sprang away from the cat, ran round in a circle, yelping with pain, while the cat clambered to the top of a nearby gatepost.

The man had recovered the leash and was soothing the dog. Again Miss Paisley extemporized a prayer, this time of thankfulness. Then the habit of years asserted itself over the teaching she believed she had received from the cat.

"I am afraid, sir, my cat has injured your dog. I am very sorry. If there is anything I can do —"

"That's all right, miss," a genial cockney voice answered. "He asked for it, an' he got it." The dog was bleeding under the throat, and there were two long weals on its chest. "That's the way cats ought to fight — get in under and strike *UP*, I say!"

"I have some iodine in my flat —"

"Cor, he don't want none o' that! Maybe your cat has saved 'im from losing an eye to the next one. Don't you give it another thought, miss!"

Miss Paisley bowed, sadly confused in her social values, which were also her moral values. The man's cockney accent was as inescapable as the excellence of his manners. Miss Paisley's world was changing too fast for her.

She enjoyed another six days and nights of the cat's company, which included four and a half days at the office. But these can be counted in, because the attention she gave to her work had become automatic and did not disturb her inner awareness of the relationship. She never defined that relationship, had not even observed the oddity that she had given the cat no name . . .

It was a Tuesday evening. The cat was not at home when she arrived.

"You've started being late for meals again," she grumbled. "Tonight, as it so happens, you can have ten minutes' grace." Her subscription to an illustrated social weekly was overdue. She filled up the renewal form, went out to buy a money order.

In the hall, Mr. Rinditch's voice reached her through the closed door of his apartment — apparently swearing to himself. There followed a muffled, whistling sound, as of cord being drawn sharply over metal. Then she heard a queer kind of growling cough and a scratching on woodwork — the kind of scratching sound that could be made by a cat's claws on a wooden panel, if the cat's body were suspended above the floor.

She stood, holding her breath, paralyzed by a sense of urgency which her imagination refused to define. She seemed to be imprisoned within herself, unable to desire escape. The sound of scratching grew thinner

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until it was so thin that she could doubt whether she heard it at all.

"You are imagining things!" she said to herself.

She smiled and went on her way to the post office. The smile became fixed. One must, she told herself, be circumspect in all things. If she were to start brawling with her neighbors every time she fancied — well, this-that-and-the-other — and without a shred of evidence — people would soon be saying she was an eccentric old maid. She wished she could stop smiling.

She bought the money order, posted it, and returned to her apartment, assuring herself that nothing at all had happened. That being agreed, everything could proceed as usual.

"Not home yet! Very well, I sha'n't wait for you. I shall cut up your meat now, and if it gets dry you've only yourself to blame." She put on the gloves with which she had held reins 37 years ago. "Just over a year! I must have used them to cut up your meat more than 300 times, and they're none the worse for wear. You couldn't buy gloves like this nowadays. I don't fancy tinned salmon. I think I'll make myself an omelette. I remember Cook was always a little uncertain with her omelettes."

She made the omelette carefully, but ate it quickly. When she had finished her coffee, she went to the bookcase above the escritoire. She had not opened the glass doors for more than ten years. She took out *Ivanhoe*, which her father had given to her mother before they were married.

At a quarter past ten, she closed the book.

"You know I've never waited up for you! And I'm not going to begin now."

The routine was to leave the curtains parted a little — about the width of a cat. Tonight she closed them. When she got into bed, she could soon see moonlight through the chinks by the rings . . . and then the daylight.

In the morning, she took some trouble to avoid meeting Jenkins. As if he had lain in wait for her, he popped out from the service cupboard under the staircase.

"Good morning, madam. I haven't seen your pussy cat this morning."

Pussy cat! What a nauseating way to speak of her cat!

"I'm not worrying, Jenkins. He often goes off on his own for a couple of days. I'm a little late this morning."

She was not late — she caught her usual train to London with the usual margin. At the office, her colleagues seemed more animated than usual. A fragment of their chatter penetrated. "If *Lone Lass* doesn't win tomorrow, I shall be going to London for my summer holiday." A racehorse, of course. One of the so-called classic races tomorrow, but she could not remember which. It reminded her of Mr. Rinditch. A very low, coarse man! Her thought shifted to

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that very nice man who owned the dog. One of nature's gentlemen! "*Get in under and strike UP!*"

She did not go out at lunch hour, so did not buy any cat's-meat.

That evening, at a few minutes to 8, she heard Jenkins's footstep on the landing. He knocked at her door.

"Good evening, madam. I hope I'm not disturbing you. There's something I'd like to show you, if you can spare a couple o' minutes."

On the way downstairs there broke upon Miss Paisley the full truth about herself and Jenkins. Madam! She could hear now the contempt in his voice, could even hear the innumerable guffaws that had greeted his anecdotes of the female clerk who gave herself the airs of a lady in temporarily distressed circumstances. But her dignity had now passed into her own keeping.

He led her along the corridor, through the door giving onto the yard, to the six ashcans. He lifted a lid. On top of the garbage was the carcass of her cat. Attached to the neck was a length of green blind cord.

"Well, Jenkins?" Her fixed smile was unnerving him.

"He was in Mr. Rinditch's room again, soon after you came 'ome last night. You can't really complain, knowin' what he said he'd do. And hangin' an animal isn't torture if it's done properly, like this was. I don't suppose your poor little pussy cat felt any pain, Just pulled the string over the top of the coat-hook, and it was all over."

"That is immaterial." She knew that her cold indifference was robbing this jackal of the sadistic treat he had promised himself. "How do we know that Mr. Rinditch is responsible? It might have been anybody in the building, Jenkins."

"I tell you, it was him! Last night, when my missus went in with his evenin' meal, same as usual, she saw a length o' that blind cord stickin' out from under his bed. And there was a bit o' green fluff on the coat-hook, where the cord had frayed. The missus did a bit more nosing while she was clearing away, an' she spotted the cat's collar in the wastepaper basket. You couldn't hang a cat properly with that collar on, 'cause o' the metal. She said the strap part had been cut — like as it might be with a razor."

Miss Paisley gazed a second time into the ashcan. The collar had certainly been removed. Jenkins, watching her, thought she was still unwilling to believe him. Like most habitual liars, he was always excessively anxious to prove his word when he happened to be telling the truth.

"Come to think of it, the collar will still be in that basket," he said, mainly to himself. "Listen! He keeps it near enough to the front window. Come round to the front and maybe you'll be able to see it for yourself."

The basket was of plaited wicker. Through the interstices Miss Paisley could see enough of the collar to banish all doubt.

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She could listen to herself talking to Jenkins, just as she had been able to see herself standing at the ashcan, knowing what was under the lid before Jenkins removed it. How easy it was to be calm when you had made up your mind!

When she returned to her room it was only five minutes past 8. Never mind. The calm would last as long as she needed it. In two hours and twenty-five minutes, Mr. Rinditch would come home. She was shivering. She put on the green suede lumber jacket, then she sat in her armchair, erect, her outstretched fingers in the folds of the upholstery.

"Before Mr. Rinditch comes back, I want you to know that I heard you scratching on his wall. You were alive then. We have already faced the fact that if I had hammered on the door and — brawled — you would be alive now. We won't argue about it. There's a lot to be said on both sides, so we will not indulge in recriminations."

Miss Paisley was silent until twenty-five minutes past 10, when she got up and put on the riding gloves, as if she were about to cut meat for her cat. The knife lay on the shelf in its usual place. Her hand snatched at the handle, as if someone were trying to take it away from her.

"'*Get in under and strike UP!*'" she whispered — and then Miss Paisley's physical movements again became unmanageable. She was gripping the handle of the knife, but she could not raise it from the shelf. She had the illusion of exerting her muscles, of pulling with all the strength of her arm against an impossibly heavy weight. Dimly she could hear Mr. Rinditch come home and slam his door.

"I've let myself become excited! I must get back my calm."

Still wearing the gloves and the lumber jacket, she went back to her chair.

"At my age I can't alter the habits of a lifetime — and when I try, I am pulled two ways at once. I told you in the first place that you had come too late. You oughtn't to have gone into Mr. Rinditch's room. He killed you in malice, and I betrayed you — oh, yes, I did! — and now I can't even pray."

Miss Paisley's thoughts propounded riddles and postulated nightmares with which her genteel education was unable to cope. When she came to full consciousness of her surroundings it was a quarter to 3 in the morning. The electric light was burning and she was wearing neither the gloves nor the green suede jacket.

"I don't remember turning on the light — I'm too tired to remember anything." She would sleep on in the morning, take a day off. She undressed and got into bed. For the first time for more than a year, she fell asleep without thought of the cat.

She was awakened shortly after 7 by a number of unusual sounds — of a clatter in the hall and voices raised, of a coming and going on the

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stairs. She sat up and listened. On the ground floor Mrs. Jenkins was shouting while she cried — a working-class habit which Miss Paisley deplored. A voice she recognized as that of the boilermaker who lived on the top floor shouted up the stairs to his wife.

"Oh, Emma! They've taken 'im away. Hangcuffs an' all! Cor!"

Miss Paisley put on her long winter coat, pulled the collar up to her chin, and opened her door.

"What is all the noise about?" she asked the boilermaker.

"That bookie on the ground floor, miss. Someone cut 'is throat for 'im in the night. The pleece've pinched Jenkins." He added: "Hangcuffs an' all!"

"Oh!" said Miss Paisley. "I see!"

Miss Paisley shut the door. She dressed and prinked with more care than usual. She remembered trying to pick up the knife, remembered sitting down in an ecstasy of self-contempt, then groping in a mental fog that enveloped time and place. But there were beacons in the fog. "*Get in under and strike UP!*" was one beacon, the slogan accompanied by a feeling of intense pride. And wasn't there another beacon? A vague memory of slinking, like a cat, in the shadows — to the river. Why the river? Of rinsing her hands in cold water. Of returning to her chair. Return. *£1 Reward for Return.* Her head was spinning. Anyhow, "someone cut 'is throat for 'im in the night."

So far from feeling crushed, Miss Paisley found that she had recovered the power to pray.

"I have committed murder, so I quite see that it's absurd to ask for anything. But I really must keep calm for the next few hours. If I may be helped to keep calm, please, I can manage the rest myself."

At the local police station Miss Paisley gave an able summary of events leading to the destruction of her cat, and her own subsequent actions, "while in a state of trance."

The desk sergeant stifled a yawn. He produced a form and asked her a number of questions concerning her identity and occupation, but no questions at all about the murder. When he had finished writing down the answers, he read them aloud.

"And your statement is, Miss Paisley, that it was you who killed William Rinditch, in — in a state of trance you said, didn't you?"

Miss Paisley assented, and signed her statement.

"Just at present the inspector is very busy," explained the sergeant, "so I must ask you to take a seat in the waiting room."

Miss Paisley, who had expected the interview to end with "hangcuffs," clung to her calm and sat in the waiting room, insultingly unguarded, for more than an hour. Then she was grudgingly invited to enter a police car, which took her to county headquarters.

Chief Inspector Green, who had

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served his apprenticeship at Scotland Yard, had dealt with a score or more of self-accusing hysterics. He knew that about one in four would claim to have committed the murder while in a trance — knew, too, that this kind could be the most troublesome if they fancied they were treated frivolously.

"Then you believe Rinditch killed your cat, Miss Paisley, because Jenkins told you so?"

"By no means!" She described the cat's collar and the method of killing, which necessitated the removal of the collar. She added details about the wastepaper basket.

"Then the collar is still in that basket, if Jenkins was telling the truth?"

But investigation on the spot established that there was no cat's collar in the wastepaper basket, nor anywhere else in the apartment. Miss Paisley was astonished — she knew she had seen it in that basket.

The interview was resumed in her flatlet, where she asserted that she had intended to kill Mr. Rinditch when he returned at 10:30, but was insufficiently prepared at that time. She did not know what time it was when she killed him, but knew that it was not later than a quarter to three in the morning. The weapon had been the knife which she used exclusively for cutting the cat's special meat.

"I have no memory at all of the act itself, Inspector. I can only say that it was fixed in my mind that I must get in close and strike upwards."

The inspector blinked, hesitated, then tried another line.

"It was after 10:30, anyhow, you said — after he had locked up for the night. How did you get in?"

"Again, I can't tell. I can't have hammered on his door, or someone would have heard me. I might have — I must have — got in by his window. I regret to confess that on one occasion I did enter his apartment that way in order to remove my cat, which would not come out when I called it."

"How did you get into the yard? That door is locked at night."

"Probably Jenkins left the key in it — he is very negligent."

"So you have no memory at all of the crime itself? You are working out what you think you must have done?"

Miss Paisley remembered that she had prayed for calm.

"I appreciate the force of your remark, Inspector. But I suggest that it would be a little unusual, to say the least, for a woman of my antecedents and habits to accuse herself falsely for the sake of notoriety. I ask you to believe that I sat in that chair at about 10:30, that my next clear memory is of being in the chair at a quarter to 3. Also, there were other signs —"

"Right! We accept that you got out of that chair — though you don't remember it. You may have done other things, too, but I'll show you that you *didn't* kill Rinditch. To

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begin with, let's have a look at the murder knife."

Miss Paisley went to the cupboard.

"It isn't here!" she exclaimed. "Oh, but of course! I must have — I mean, didn't you *find* the knife?"

Inspector Green was disappointed. He could have settled the matter at once if she had produced the knife — which had indeed been found in the body of the deceased. A knife that could be bought at any ironmonger's in the country, unidentifiable in itself.

"If you had entered Rinditch's room, you'd have left fingerprints all over the place —"

"But I was wearing leather riding gloves —"

"Let's have a look at 'em, Miss Paisley."

Miss Paisley went back to the cupboard. They should be on the top shelf. They were not.

"I can't think where I must have put them!" she faltered.

"It doesn't matter!" sighed Green. "Let me tell you this, Miss Paisley. The man — or, if you like, woman — who killed Rinditch couldn't have got away without some pretty large stains on his — or her — clothes."

"It wouldn't have soaked through the lumber jacket," murmured Miss Paisley.

"What lumber jacket?"

"Oh! I forgot to mention it — or rather, I didn't get a chance. When I sat down in that chair at 10:30 I was wearing a green suede lumber jacket. When I came to myself in the small hours, I was not wearing it."

"Then somewhere in this flatlet we ought to find a ladies' lumber jacket, heavily bloodstained. I'll look under everything and you look inside."

When the search had proved fruitless, Miss Paisley turned at bay.

"You don't believe me!"

"I believe you believe it all, Miss Paisley. You felt you had to kill the man who had killed your cat. You knew you couldn't face up to a job like murder, especially with a knife. So you had a brainstorm, or whatever they call it, in which you kidded yourself you had committed the murder."

"Then my meat knife, my old riding gloves, and my lumber jacket have been hidden in order to deceive you?" shrilled Miss Paisley.

"Not to deceive me, Miss Paisley. To deceive yourself! If you want my opinion, you hid the knife and the gloves and the jacket because they were *not* bloodstained."

Miss Paisley felt a little giddy.

"You don't need to feel too badly about *not* killing him," he said, smiling to himself. "At 7 o'clock this morning a constable found Jenkins trying to sink a bag in the river. That bag was Rinditch's, which was kept under the bed o' nights. And Jenkins had 230-odd quid in cash which he can't account for."

Miss Paisley made no answer.

"Maybe you still sort of feel you killed Rinditch?" Miss Paisley nodded assent. "Then remember this. If the brain can play one sort of trick

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on you, it can play another — same as it's doing now."

Inspector Green had been very understanding and very kind, Miss Paisley told herself. It was her duty to abide by his decision — especially as there was no means of doing otherwise — and loyally accept his interpretation of her own acts. The wretched Jenkins — an abominable man — would presumably be hanged. Things, reflected Miss Paisley, had a way of coming right. . . .

After a single appearance before the magistrate, Jenkins was committed on the charge of murder and would come up for trial in the autumn at the Old Bailey. Miss Paisley removed her interest.

One evening in early autumn Miss Paisley was sitting in her armchair, reviving the controversy as to whether her father had made a mistake about the croquet lawn. In her eagerness she thrust her hands between the folds of the upholstery. Her fingers encountered a hard object. She hooked it with her finger and pulled up her dead cat's collar.

She held it in both hands while there came a vivid memory of her peering through Mr. Rinditch's window, Jenkins beside her, and seeing the collar in the wastepaper basket . . . The buckle was still fastened. The leather had been cut, as if with a razor. She read the inscription: her own name and address and — *£1 Reward for Return.*

"I took it out of that basket — *afterwards!*" She relived the ecstatic moment in which she had killed Rinditch. Every detail was now clear-cut. Strike *UP!* — as the cat had struck — then leap to safety. She had pulled off a glove, to snatch the collar from the basket and thrust the collar under the neck of her jumper; then she had put the glove on again before leaving the room and making her way to the river. Back in her chair she had retrieved the collar.

Gone was the exaltation which had sustained her in her first approach to the police. She stood up, rigid, as she had stood in the hall while listening to the scratching on the panel, refusing to accept an unbearable truth. Once again she had the illusion of being locked up, aware now that there could be no escape from herself.

There remained the collar — evidence irrefutable, but escapable.

"If I keep this as a memento, I shall soon get muddled and accuse myself of murder all over again! What was it that nice inspector said — 'if the brain can play one trick on you it can play another'."

She smiled as she put the collar in her handbag, slipped on a coat and walked — by the most direct route, this time — to the Seventeenth-Century bridge. She dropped the collar into the river, knowing that it would sink under the weight of its metal — unlike the bloodstained lumber jacket and the riding gloves which, Miss Paisley suddenly remembered, she had weighted with stones scratched from the soil of the old cemetery . . .

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